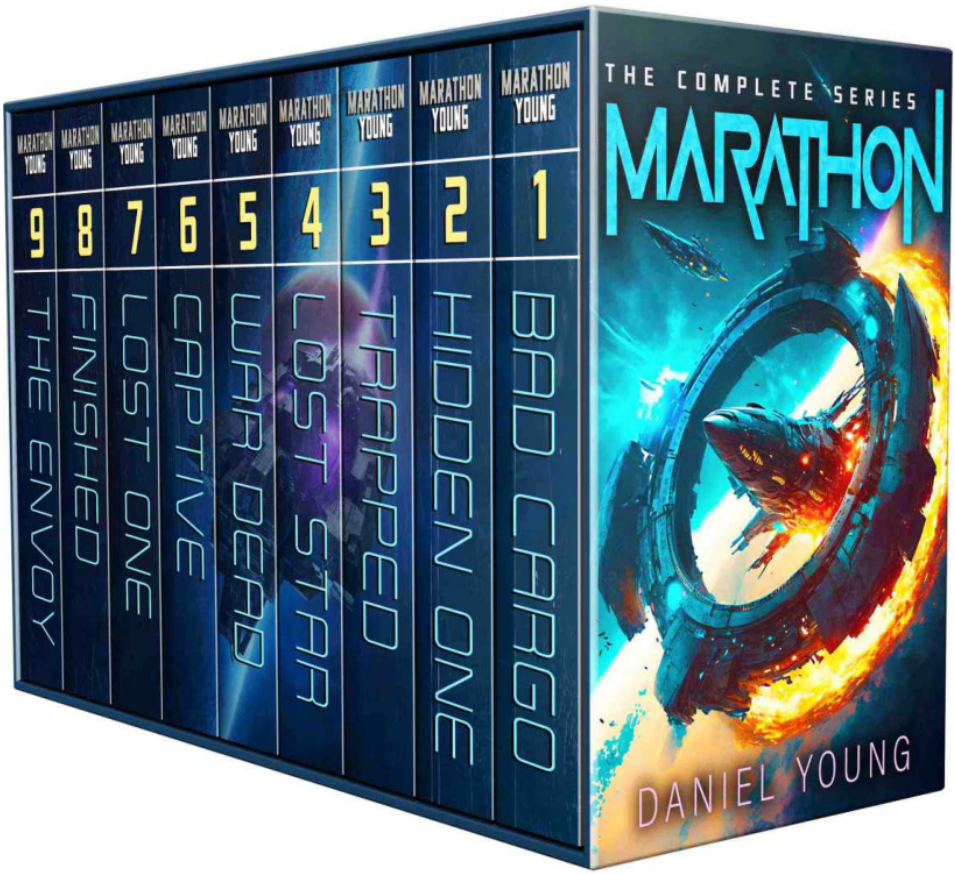

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MARATHON: THE COMPLETE SERIES

BOOKS 1-9

DANIEL YOUNG

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CONTENTS

Enter If You Dare…

Bad Cargo

- Foreword
- I. Welcome to the Fringe
  - Chapter 1
  - Chapter 2
  - Chapter 3
  - Chapter 4
  - Chapter 5
  - Chapter 6
  - Chapter 7
  - Chapter 8
- II. A Job is a Job
  - Chapter 9
  - Chapter 10
  - Chapter 11
  - Chapter 12
  - Chapter 13
  - Chapter 14
  - Chapter 15
  - Chapter 16
  - Chapter 17
- III. Once More, With Feeling
  - Chapter 18
  - Chapter 19
  - Chapter 20
  - Chapter 21
  - Chapter 22
  - Chapter 23
  - Chapter 24
  - Chapter 25
  - Chapter 26
  - Chapter 27
  - Chapter 28
- Epilogue

Hidden World
I. Snake Pit
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
II. One Last Job
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Trapped
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Lost Star
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3

Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15

War Dead
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17

Captive
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9

Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17

Lost
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17

Finished
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13

Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17

Envoy
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16

Afterword
Also by Daniel Young

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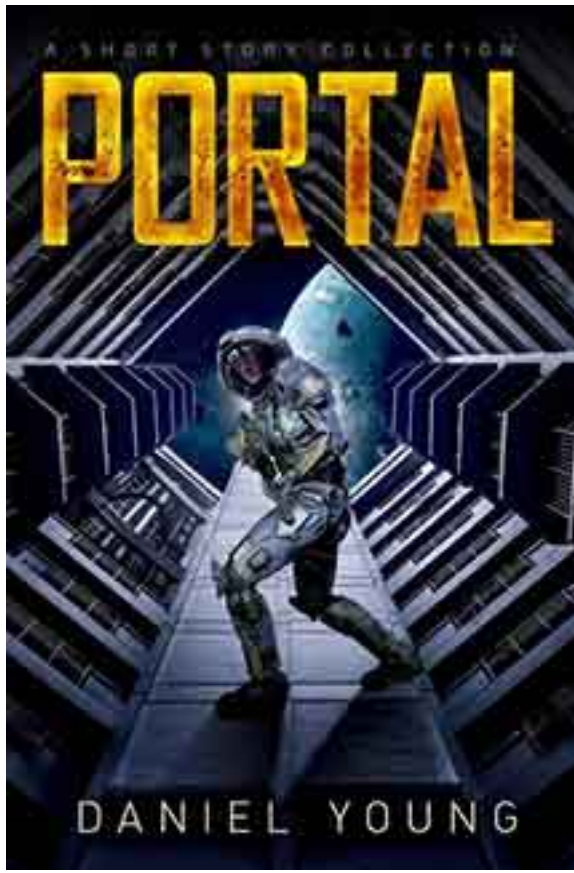

- **A starship captain faced with an impossible choice.**
- **An amnesiac awoken on an alien world.**
- **A timecop lost in a constantly-changing history.**

These stories and many more await inside the page of *Portal*, a short story collection from the mind of Daniel Young. Six distinct worlds with their own strange rules, pitfalls, and challenges.

Nothing is as it seems...

Enter the *Portal* if you dare!

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BAD CARGO

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FOREWORD

The *Marathon* series is an homage to a certain type of golden age space opera. Thrilling stories in which hard science isn't a concern and the planets of distant star systems are easily accessible, habitable, and full of alien races and strange creatures. Retro technology sits right alongside playful new inventions.

In other words, this is old-fashioned *adventure* sci-fi. I hope you have as much fun reading it as I did writing it!

—Daniel Young

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PART 1

WELCOME TO THE FRINGE

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1

Adam Eckhart traced his rifle sight over a line of concrete bunkers on the horizon. They hugged the dusty desert ground and blended into the grey landscape. Eckhart could barely see them, even through his field glasses.

"Bing and I will skip around the compound to the right. We'll hide in those dunes behind the main entrance. Dallas, you and Alice wait here. When you see my signal, you'll assault the entrance and draw the suckers out front. Then Bing and I will come in from behind."

"How can you tell which is the front entrance?" Bing asked as he bobbed his many-eyed head above the hill where the *Marathon* crew hid. "There must be fifty buildings over there."

Alice made a croaking sound behind her gas mask. Her sightless eye sockets never left their target. "They don't bother to guard the other forty-nine entrances, do they? That one with the glass front is where they're hiding the target."

Dallas Eldridge did *not* rise above the hill. He turned his helmet toward the dirt blocking him from the compound. He didn't have eyes, either. He didn't need them.

His helmet made that telltale whirring noise when he scanned the area through the hill itself. "The glass is armored … and they've planted mines all over the ground in front of the compound. If you want to get behind them, you'd better cut a wide circle."

"How many are inside?"

Dallas swiveled his head back and forth. The joints in his mechanical neck made a metallic buzz. His whole prosthetic body made the same noise whenever he moved. His crewmates had long ago gotten used to that sound, and Eckhart no longer really noticed it.

A segment of Dallas' reinforced Crionium helmet slid aside, and a periscopic sight rose from inside. A bunch of circuitry gleamed inside the cavity.

Some part of Dallas' original brain still lived in the body, but Eckhart couldn't see anything organic in there. Dallas' body had been completely replaced by prosthetics, except for that one tiny

nucleus of brain that never saw the light of day.

The periscope extended just far enough to see over the hilltop, swiveling from right to left. “Most of the compound is empty. All the troops are in the main building. They’re downstairs, surrounding the vault.”

“That settles it,” Alice rasped through her mask. “We’re going in through the front door.”

Eckhart shouldered his rifle. “Wait until Bing and I get into position.”

“The vault is solid Kesmite,” Dallas reported. “How do you plan to get through that?”

“I’ll answer that question when I get into the compound. Come on, Bing.”

Eckhart half-crouched, half-crabwalked away from their hiding place, but he didn’t go the way he’d originally planned. He didn’t want to step on any mines.

Bing followed him, slithering on six tentacle-like legs. His other two held twin rifles, and he carried a backpack full of Halfanite charges just in case.

Bing kept casting backward glances toward Dallas and Alice. They disappeared behind the first swell when Eckhart and Bing got twenty paces away.

Eckhart crawled a long way out of his way. He paused at strategic spots to peek out and make sure he was well out of range of any mines.

“Are you sure this two-pronged approach is the best?” Bing murmured in his ear. “What if the freaks catch on that we’re trying to flank them? We won’t be able to drive off that many if they turn on us.”

“That’s where you come in, pal.” Eckhart paused again. “This is it. Let’s set up camp here.”

He laid his rifle aside and pulled off Bing’s backpack. Bing took a glance of his own toward the compound. “Only ten of ‘em back here.”

“I’m telling you this is our best chance to get inside; now stop dithering. Hand over the Halfanite.”

“You said you were going to wait until Dallas distracted them from the front.”

“I am.” Eckhart pulled out a block of Halfanite and a handful of primers. “Get ready to make a big mess. You’re good at that.”

Eckhart shot Bing a grin, grasped his rifle, and stood up. He was still far enough away that the armed guards behind the compound couldn't see him. The grey jumpsuit over his flight uniform camouflaged him perfectly.

The guards followed the same pattern of patrolling the compound. They crossed each other's paths to change positions; then they turned outward to scan the surrounding countryside.

They searched for anyone sneaking up on the compound, but of course they didn't see anything. They must have been keeping watch on this stretch of desert for so long that they no longer expected to see anyone.

Then they turned, crossed each other's paths again, and reversed the pattern. They studied the compound itself, the sky, and the hills on either side while they walked. That left at least a minute and a half when they weren't facing outward to search the desert they already believed was empty.

No one from the nearby town came out this far. None of the ordinary citizens would dare to approach the Jackal Clan's headquarters. The alien crime gang had everyone on Oskz well trained.

Eckhart timed his movement so none of the guards were looking toward him. He straightened up, flipped his rifle sideways, and used the shiny metal housing to reflect the sun toward the compound. He repeated the maneuver until the guards resumed their places and turned outward. He ducked down just in time.

"Do you really think that will work?" Bing asked.

"Dallas can see us even if it doesn't. Any second now..."

A ground-shaking explosion finished his sentence for him. Eckhart and Bing both scrambled onto their knees to look out at the compound. A billowing cloud of flame erupted from its other side.

Eckhart swept his field glasses to his eyes, and Bing gasped. Dallas rose over the opposite hill, and his giant mechanical body sent a thrill of fear through Eckhart's chest. He hoped he never had to face Dallas on the other end of a gun.

Dallas stomped down the hill, and two enormous assault guns pivoted out of slots in both his arms. Shouts and frightened yells punctuated the din the minute he made his appearance. The guards protecting the back of the compound raced away to help their friends defend the compound.

He stalked ever nearer, and the sun reflected off his armored

body. He deliberately stamped on a mine, and the thing detonated under his massive foot.

The echoing boom startled the guards, and they all opened fire. Their shots deflected off Dallas' armor, and he cut loose with his own weapons.

Waves of Datrium plasma billowed from the gun ports on his arms. It swept the lead from the enemy guns before him and cleared a path.

Screams and terrified orders drifted on the wind to Eckhart's ears. He slung his rifle over his shoulder and grabbed Bing's backpack. "Get ready!"

The minute he spoke, Alice vaulted out from behind the hill. She shouldered her rifle, but she didn't follow Dallas.

She cut sideways at a blinding run. She loped along stooped, over and her two-toed feet gripped the sand with unerring accuracy. Her bald, skeletal head swiveled back and forth, while her empty eye sockets scanned the area in front of the compound.

The Bion race might not have eyes, but their sightless sockets possessed more photoreceptors than Earthling eyes. The Bion's enhanced sensory organs could detect almost as much as Dallas' prosthetics.

She crossed the dunes to the end of the line of Jackal Clan guards. Dallas' massive presence distracted them so much they either didn't notice Alice, or they mistook her for something too insignificant to bother about.

She stopped running level with their line, turned toward the compound, and started walking. She traced her rifle sight back and forth across the sand and fired once, twice, a dozen times.

Every shot set off a mine. They erupted in an ever-expanding carpet of explosions to clear her path to the entrance.

That got the guards' attention, but when they tried to counter her attack, Dallas doubled down on his own assault. The guards had to wheel back and forth between one attacker and the other.

"Now!" Eckhart hopped to his feet and took off at a dead run, but Bing overtook him in a second.

The Yakit hybrid loped past Eckhart and reached the now-deserted compound first. Bing crouched against the concrete wall. "Do we get to make a mess now?"

Eckhart ripped open the backpack. "Go to town, buddy."

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2

Bing let out one of his chirpy laughs and snatched five blocks of Halfanite at once. His many arms could work a lot faster, and Eckhart envied his friend at times like this.

Bing worked fast, fitting the primers into the blocks. “Where do you want to plant these?”

“Dallas said the goods are downstairs. Plant them along the lower edge of the wall there.”

Eckhart smacked his first block against the concrete right above the sand. Bing planted his own block right next to Eckhart’s, but when Bing prepared to attach more of them, Eckhart stopped him. “That’s enough. We don’t want to blow the whole building.”

“We don’t?” Bing laughed again. “You’re letting me down, man.”

Eckhart pulled his friend away. “Stand clear.”

He punched the timer, and he and Bing ducked behind the nearest corner. The next building protected them from the blast, but when it went off, another ear-splitting detonation from out of sight drowned out the noise.

“Dallas always gets to make the biggest mess,” Bing complained. “It isn’t fair.”

“Well, when *you* get your ass shot off, you can get prosthetics like him and then you can make a bigger mess, too.”

Bing laughed again, and both he and Eckhart peered into the breach. A thirty-foot drop gave them a view into the compound’s basement.

Just as Dallas had said, a whole crowd of armed mercenaries stood around what looked like a giant wall of solid Crionium, the same metal as Dallas’ body armor. These men paced back and forth in the cavernous basement. The commotion from upstairs had definitely alerted them that something was going down. They conversed in rapid murmurs while they checked their weapons, gathered more of them, and rearranged their formation again and again.

“Do we send them a little Halfanite care package?” Bing whispered. “It turns out I have a few right here that need a home.”

“Wait for it.”

At Eckhart's word, another withering thud hit the building's other side. He knew that sound only too well.

The building shuddered on its foundation, and then the front side of the cavern imploded in a shower of broken concrete. Screams pierced the noise.

A cloud of dust rippled into the cavern, followed closely by a shaft of blinding sunshine. Dallas stormed in, shooting everything before him with his plasma guns. Alice darted around him and popped off dozens of rifle shots.

"Go!" Eckhart ordered.

He and Bing lobbed their Halfanite into the cavern and jumped. Eckhart only threw two blocks that sailed apart and exploded amongst the mercenaries.

Bing threw six at once, and the cavern descended into chaos. Eckhart landed in smoke and dust, and the sunbeams reduced visibility even more. The dust scattered the light and created a blazing white screen that prevented him from seeing anything.

Gunshots rocked the basement. Plasma eruptions came from Eckhart's right. Rifles blazed on the left. The different sounds told Eckhart where the two sides were.

"Dallas!" he yelled.

Alice grabbed him from the other side. "This way!"

She propelled him through the smoke, and he followed her guiding hands. She parked him in a murky corner. Her metallic, rasping voice reached into his ear through her mask. "Plant them here!"

Smoke stung his eyes. He clamped them shut and worked by feel alone. She straightened up and fired into the murk while he scrambled to pull more Halfanite from Bing's backpack.

He put his life in Alice's hands and turned his back to the battle. He had to get into this vault. More explosions crashed from all sides. Eckhart could just picture Bing dancing through the cavern, doing as much damage as possible.

Eckhart jammed the primers into four blocks and smacked them against the vault. Alice grabbed him again. "Not there! Over here—the door is weaker here!"

She helped him rip the blocks off and replace them where she'd said. He was fumbling blind, but she didn't have that problem.

They moved the blocks, and she yanked him aside. She activated the timers and threw Eckhart onto the floor. She dove in front of

him, flipped onto her side, and sprayed her rifle into the smoke.

The blocks blasted outward, and more screams set Eckhart's hair on end. He jumped to his feet and checked himself when a looming figure darkened the basement.

Eckhart grabbed his rifle to defend himself, but he relaxed when Dallas clomped out of the mayhem. His guns rotated from side to side, spouting plasma. He turned right and left, picking off any mercenaries that dared to show themselves.

Eckhart couldn't wait any longer. He groped back to the hole blown in the vault. Alice and Dallas pivoted in front of him and pointed their guns outward to protect him. He would never get a better opportunity.

He dove through the gap and somersaulted into a massive vault lined with shelves. Crates of rations and ammunition, pallets of printed money, the small black velvet boxes of precious gems… everywhere he looked, Eckhart saw treasure he would give anything to lay his hands on.

He had to concentrate. He'd mounted this assault for one thing, and he wouldn't be able to carry all this swag back to the *Marathon* anyway.

He raced down the aisles, searching everywhere. The object he wanted wouldn't be lying around on one of these shelves in plain sight.

He reached the back wall without finding what he was looking for. A smooth stretch of brand-new Crionium covered the back wall, with no shelves in front of it. This had to be it.

"Alice!" he bellowed over his shoulder, and she sprang through the hole. "The safe must be here. Can you see it?"

She scanned over the surface and pointed to a corner by the floor. "There."

He pushed her away. "Go replace Dallas. Send him in here."

She raced back to the breach. The noise of explosions and gunfire diminished outside, but that didn't give Eckhart a warm, fuzzy feeling. The Jackal Clan would only be gathering their forces for another assault somewhere else.

Dallas approached, and Eckhart pointed to the spot Alice had indicated. "Can you open it without killing us all?"

"I'll give it a whirl."

Dallas knelt next to the corner where it met the other wall. He pointed his assault gun at the corner, and the plasma ejection port

slotted back into his prosthetic arm. A different attachment rotated out of a separate chamber in his armor, and a thick red laser erupted from the lens.

Dallas started cutting through the thick metal. It took a lot longer than Eckhart liked, and he started to fidget.

He jumped and swung his rifle up when someone hopped into the vault, but it was only Bing. “The dipshits are retreating. Alice is scouting the compound to find out where they are.”

“Go over there and arm yourself with everything you can carry,” Eckhart told him. “Take some of those rocket launchers and bring over some of that Halfanite.”

Bing plunged into the supplies and brought back his backpack, bulging with so much Halfanite that Eckhart almost told him to put some of it back. He changed his mind when Dallas’ laser shut off. He had sliced out a square section of the wall, but it was barely larger than a slice of bread.

Dallas dug his mechanical fingers around the margins and lifted down the section. He laid it on the floor and a bunch of wires trailed from its back. “Battery grenades,” he whispered. “The buffoons rigged up tripwires to blow the payload if anyone tampered with the safe. They could have wiped out half the damn planet.”

“Does the payload have any other protections?”

“Only that it’s too small for me to get my hand inside.” Dallas stood up. “You take it.”

Eckhart knelt in Dallas’ old place and peered into the gap. A brilliant egg-sized crystal glowed blood-red in the darkness. A shining flicker pulsed inside the stone like a living thing.

Eckhart’s scalp prickled. The stone cast some mystical spell on him. He could kneel here and stare at it forever.

Just then, Alice’s face appeared in the breach behind his back. “They’re moving in! It’s time to roll!”

Eckhart shot his hand into the hole and seized the stone. What did he expect? He thought a stone as powerful as this would burn him, or that his arm would fall off if he touched it. He thought it would have some kind of shielding to protect everyone from its power.

His arm didn’t fall off. His fingers closed around it and he ripped it out of the hole. Dallas and Bing spun around and aimed their weapons toward the breach, but Alice wasn’t there anymore.

Eckhart grabbed Bing's backpack, now overflowing with Halfanite. He slung the strap over one shoulder and stuffed the crystal into his pocket.

He crammed a primer into a block of Halfanite as the three friends raced out of the vault. Alice stood guard, but Eckhart didn't see any mercenaries. "Where are they?"

A catastrophic *kaboom* answered that question for him. It hit the roof, and the whole compound caved in on top of their heads.

Dallas dove for his comrades and extended both arms over their heads. Eckhart, Bing, and Alice huddled close to him and plunged for the only exit.

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3

The dust had settled while the friends were inside the vault. Now Eckhart could see the giant gaping maw that Dallas had blasted in the building's side.

The friends clambered over dead mercenaries and shattered debris into the blinding sunshine. Eckhart squinted westward toward the town, where the *Marathon* would pick them up.

The moment he turned his head, a whistle made him spin around. Dallas barely stepped into the rocket's path, and took the shot square in the chest to stop it from wiping out the whole crew.

"What the hell are they doing?" Bing shrieked. "Why are they shooting rockets at us? Are they trying to destroy the crystal?"

Eckhart grabbed him and Alice. "Go! Move!"

He punched the timer on his block of Halfanite and threw it behind Dallas just in time to see a giant mob of mercenaries charge around the compound from the east.

"Get into town!" he yelled to his people. "Get back to the *Marathon*!"

Town was being a bit generous, but it was bigger than it had any right to be. A grid of a few dozen pathways lined with the day-to-day businesses that served a small population spread out in the desert that encroached on all sides. It was better cover than anything around the compound.

They all took off running. Eckhart and Bing pitched primed Halfanite behind them. Dallas laid down a punishing carpet of plasma, but the crew barely made it into town before another raft of mercenaries flanked them from the north.

The crew ran around four houses on the outskirts of town. Dallas turned to fire on them, and the enemy pursuing the friends immediately closed the gap.

Dallas wheeled one gun behind the fleeing crew and one toward the north, but he couldn't drive them all back alone. Eckhart steered him backward onto Main Street, but the mercenaries must have planned based on what they'd seen at the compound.

The foremost pursuers occupied Dallas while another group appeared on a nearby roof. They fired a rocket down at him from

above. It smashed into his helmet, and another hit him between the shoulder blades from a different roof. He buckled and went down on one knee.

Eckhart grabbed the hard metal collar behind Dallas' neck. "Get out of here! Move!"

Dallas lurched to his feet and stumbled after the rest of the crew. He could run as fast as Alice once he faced forward, but that meant he couldn't shoot as well.

The crew dodged from one building to another. Eckhart changed their direction as often as possible. The mercenaries on the roofs couldn't keep up, and the *Marathon* crew started to eke out an advantage.

"Over there!" Eckhart plunged into an alley between a repair shop and a boardinghouse. An empty stretch of desert vanished to the farthest horizon beyond the edge of town.

The crew burst into the open…and stopped.

"Where is it?" Bing asked. "Where's the *Marathon*?"

"She should have picked us up right here!" Alice growled. "I'll kill her if she abandoned us."

"She didn't abandon us." Eckhart whirled on the spot and fired down the alley as the mercenaries charged into view.

Bing scooped another load of Halfanite out of the bag, but Eckhart was already herding his people away. They raced down the line of weathered houses and into another alley.

"Get that little monster on the horn!" Alice snapped.

"She's already on it." Dallas halted in the shadows and touched the side of his head. "She took the *Marathon* into the atmosphere to protect it from the firefight."

"What firefight?" Alice demanded. "The firefight is all the way over on the other side of town."

"This way." Dallas pushed in front of the others. "She's directing me to another rendezvous point."

Eckhart ran up behind him. "How far away is it?"

"It's behind the—" Dallas shot out a hand and snatched Bing by the back of his shirt. He yanked Bing out of sight right before Bing ran onto Main Street. "The mercenaries!"

A punishing barrage of rocket blasts dotted the street in front of the crew. Eckhart pressed his people back into the nearest building and cowered until the worst passed.

"The rendezvous point is across town," Dallas called over the

last crashes. “We have to cross Main Street.”

“That makes it convenient,” Alice grumbled.

“Where are the mercenaries?” Eckhart asked. “Can you see them?”

Dallas rotated his helmet back and forth. “They’re on top of the hotel—at least, some of them are. Three more groups are hidden down the street—one behind the storehouse and one between the harbormaster’s office and the medical clinic. The biggest group is next to the plasma generator. They’re arming to attack as soon as we show ourselves.”

“How do we get out of here?” Bing asked.

“Easy,” Eckhart replied. “We create another diversion.”

“You and your diversions,” Dallas exclaimed. “Does this one involve me taking another rocket to the head?”

Bing patted his big friend’s armored shoulder. “Don’t worry, buddy. It won’t make you any dumber than you already are. You’ve already lost too many brain cells.”

“Who said anything about brain cells? I’m running on Datrium fumes over here.”

“You don’t have to do anything,” Eckhart cut in. “I’ll create the diversion myself.”

The other three jerked around to stare at him. “How?” Alice asked. “Are you going to jump out in front of them and sacrifice yourself?”

“Something like that.”

“Yay!” Bing cheered. “The *Marathon* is mine! I’ve been waiting twelve years for this.”

Eckhart only laughed. “Don’t celebrate my demise too quickly. Get ready to run when you hear the signal.”

“What signal?” Alice asked.

“You’ll know when you see it.” Eckhart took the backpack out of Bing’s hands.

“Hey! I need those! What am I gonna…?”

Eckhart shoved his rifle into Bing’s grasp. Bing grimaced at it. “What the hell am I supposed to do with this?”

“Throw it at ‘em. Get ready to run.”

“What are you gonna—?”

Eckhart didn’t wait around to answer any more questions. He dashed back down the alley, toward the desert outside of town. He skimmed behind a dozen houses and halted by the plasma

generator.

He crouched behind the building and pulled out a single block of Halfanite, trying to steal a glance at the mercenaries while he crammed the primer into the block. This had better work, because the Jackal Clan had a lot more fighters on these streets than he ever expected. Four people couldn't get away from them, not even when one of them was Dallas Eldridge.

Eckhart pushed the block back into the backpack and adjusted the timer. He set it for its maximum setting and zipped the bag shut, pushing the whole package through a ventilation duct in the generator wall.

The window opened right at ground level, and the backpack fell into the basement. Eckhart sprang to his feet and trotted down a different alley. He took a position out of sight, right in front of where the mercenaries were hiding.

A few rocket launchers poked their snouts into view. They aimed for where Dallas, Bing, and Alice were hiding.

Eckhart raised his hands in a gesture of surrender and strolled onto Main Street. He walked all the way to the middle of town and turned to face the mercenaries.

He thought he heard arguing voices coming from behind him. A few mercenaries glanced out at him and whispered to each other.

He stood still. How much time did he have left? The mercenaries looked out again, and he made his last move. He pulled out the crystal and held it up.

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4

Their eyes widened exactly the way he knew they would. Two men stepped into view, heading for him. Maybe they were leaders. Maybe they were just particularly bold.

Whether they wanted to negotiate—unlikely—or just shoot him and take the crystal—very likely—he'd never know.

At that moment, the generator evaporated in a towering pillar of fire and gas. The report ripped through several nearby buildings. For a moment, he worried he'd miscalculated and leveled half the town, but it appeared only the shoddiest buildings fell.

The mercenaries whipped around to stare toward the noise, and as luck would have it, their hiding place was one of the buildings to collapse.

Dallas, Bing, and Alice bolted across the street behind Eckhart even as he staggered backward and streaked away.

With one group of pursuers in disarray, that left two more groups on the ground, and one on the roof.

He stumbled back to where his crew had darted into another alley, but he'd only made it halfway when the mercenaries by the medical clinic made their move.

They flooded into the street from both sides, closing Eckhart in two barrages of gunfire. He couldn't go forward and he couldn't go back.

He dodged left, and barely got his arms over his head before he crashed through a plate-glass window. He tumbled into a bar packed with people, but that didn't stop the mercenaries. They rushed over to the window and fired into the crowd.

Bodies twirled and toppled over Eckhart's head. Screams rang in his ears, and he plunged between dozens of legs. He scrambled to get away as dozens of shots tore the place apart.

He bumped into a solid barricade. People stepped on him and kicked him in their panic to get out of the bar.

He struggled to stand up and realized that he'd run into the bar itself. He followed it on his hands and knees, heading for the back door. Broken glass and spent shell cartridges littered the floor under his hands.

Eckhart finally reached the exit and rocketed upright. He charged outside and almost got trampled by Dallas.

Dallas grabbed him. “That was spectacular! You’re officially on diversion duty from now on.”

“Go!” Eckhart pushed his three friends ahead of him. “Lead us to the rendezvous point.”

Dallas took point, weaving in and out of buildings and alleys. The mercenaries kept cutting them off, and he dodged off course more than once. The others scrambled to keep up with him, and he had to veer back toward Main Street to avoid running into the enemy again.

Main Street loomed wide and menacing before the group. At the last minute before Dallas barreled into the open, he cocked his head to one side. “This way! Hurry!”

He dragged Alice into another side street, and the four friends burst into a small square between the harbormaster’s inspection pavilion and a line of rundown houses. High walls surrounded a space hardly bigger than a good-sized bedroom. A few aliens of different species peeked out of their windows, but Eckhart hardly saw them.

A man stood in the middle of the space—an Earthling man. How long had it been since Eckhart had seen another human being—a *full* human being? He couldn’t remember. He’d been around aliens too long.

The man gripped a sidearm. The weapon still had the United Collateral Regiment imprint on its stock.

The guy aimed the gun in Eckhart’s face, and the stranger didn’t tremble in the slightest. His sharp gaze darted from Eckhart to his crew and back. “Hold it right there! Take one more step and I’ll shoot!”

A second man cowered at the gunman’s feet, and this one looked fully Earthling, too. Both men wore perfect business suits. Their clothes looked so out of place on this dusty, lawless outpost. What the hell were they doing this far from Earth?

Earthlings almost never ventured beyond the Earth’s solar system. The heart and soul of human civilization centered there. The farther anyone traveled from Earth, the fewer full-blooded Earthlings you were likely to find. Whoever these men were, they were way out of their depth here.

The man on the ground turned over and collapsed at his friend’s

heels. He left a puddle of blood on the ground when he grabbed the first man's leg to steady himself.

The fallen man glanced up and met Eckhart's eyes. His greyish pallor and the half-wild expression told Eckhart all he needed to know. This man had been shot.

"Back off!" the first man bellowed, and Eckhart recognized the steel in the guy's voice. This man knew exactly how to use the gun in his hand. He must have used it thousands of times. "Turn around and go back where you came from or I'll—"

"Take it easy, man," Eckhart began. "We don't want to—"

At that moment, the mercenaries burst out from behind the pavilion. Gunfire scattered through the square. Eckhart, Dallas, Bing, and Alice dashed past the two strangers and plunged into a different alley.

"Where's the rendezvous point?" Eckhart called to Dallas.

"Not far! This way?"

Another shot hit a building above Eckhart's head. He glanced back to see how close the mercenaries were, and almost lost his footing when he spotted the two strangers right on his tail.

The gunman supported his wounded friend on one shoulder. The gunshot victim limped, and his weight dragged his partner down so they couldn't keep up.

Eckhart put on speed to leave them behind. If he and his crew could get far enough ahead, these lost souls might distract the mercenaries while the *Marathon* got away. He could only hope.

The alley in which the friends ran ended at another expanse of desert, except that this one wasn't empty.

Dallas pushed Bing and Alice into the open. He waved Eckhart forward, and the *Marathon* rotated into view beyond the gap.

The ship descended in a cloud of dust, but Eckhart would recognize his ship anywhere. The bottom center section still showed the unmistakable hull structure of a Banshee-class Regiment gunship.

The resemblance ended there. Every other part of the ship had been cobbled onto that base structure in a freakish Frankenstein mishmash of dozens of other vessels. The ship now more closely resembled a floating pile of wreckage that could barely fly at all.

Eckhart had made all these modifications himself, and he'd never tried to clean the ship up or make it look better. If he ever got into trouble, he just had to shut down all power to the ship's

systems, and his enemies would mistake the ship for a floating derelict rubbish scow.

The ship's outward appearance belied its power, though. Eckhart had rebuilt the ship from the ground up many times over the years. He'd added more armaments, more engine-boosting power, more defenses, and more shielding than any legal ship could carry.

The *Marathon* turned in midair, extending its landing gear. Eckhart pushed past Dallas, racing for the open ramp that lowered from the rear of the hull.

Dallas, Bing, and Alice pounded up the ramp. Eckhart would take the crystal on board, and they'd fly away into space, where they'd be safe.

A yell caught his ear from behind, but he didn't listen. Whoever those fools were, they'd made a big mistake in leaving Earth to come out to the fringes. They would get what all unprotected Earthlings got out here, and that wasn't Eckhart's problem.

The same voice called even louder. "Hey! Wait!"

Alice halted on the ramp and extended her hand to pull Eckhart aboard. Without warning, the *Marathon*'s guns swiveled around and erupted across the sand. Eckhart sprang onto the ramp and dared to look back, now that he knew he was safe.

The first shots hit the gunman, and both guys hit the ground. The wounded man lay still, but the gunman flipped over on his stomach and started crawling toward the *Marathon*.

He stretched his hand toward Eckhart, and his clear blue eyes locked on Eckhart alone. "Don't leave us behind! Help us!"

"Good luck, chump," Alice growled under her breath. She trotted up the ramp and disappeared into the ship.

Eckhart almost turned away. These two were too stupid to live if they'd come out this far without protection, but for some reason, he couldn't look away.

The gunman kept hold of his weapon no matter what. He didn't even lose his grip on it when he got shot, crawling on his elbows to hold his weapon out of the dirt. He must belong to the Regiment if he crawled like that.

He shot out his other hand. "Help us! Don't leave us!"

The *Marathon*'s engines screamed up to full power. The ship would rocket into the atmosphere any second now, and Eckhart would never see these two men again. They'd be dead in a matter of minutes.

Without thinking, Eckhart sprang off the ramp just as the engines erupted. The ship launched, but he didn't care.

He raced back to the gunman and yanked his weapon out of his hand. The guy tried to fight him. "Hey! What are you doing?"

Eckhart didn't answer. He leapt for the wounded man and grabbed his arm. The guy's floppy limp body didn't respond, but Eckhart already knew what he had to do.

He hauled the body into a sitting position and heaved it onto his shoulder just as the mercenaries exploded out of the alley. They leveled their guns to fire, and Eckhart popped off the stranger's weapon at them.

The gun ran dry in an instant, but before the mercenaries could cut Eckhart down, the *Marathon* dropped back down to the ground. It twirled on the spot, and all the guns pivoted forward. They opened up, and curling waves of plasma hit the line of buildings with devastating force.

The buildings detonated, forcing the mercenaries to take cover, and Eckhart spun away. The gunman saw him coming and struggled onto unsteady legs.

Eckhart flung his arm around the guy's shoulders and dragged him toward the *Marathon*. The ship turned sideways, and the open ramp rotated in front of them.

Eckhart propelled the gunman onto the ramp, and practically launched the other man's dead weight up next to him.

He started to climb onto the ramp himself when a crushing boom smashed into the ground right next to him. The impact flung him away from the ramp, but the gunman grabbed his wrist at the last second.

Eckhart fell against the guy's hold as dozens more shots rained down from on high. They pounded into the desert all around the *Marathon*.

The next second, a terrible ripping momentum tore the ship off the ground, with Eckhart still grasping the guy's hand for dear life. The man struggled to haul Eckhart inside while the ship rose faster and faster against gravity.

The wind tore at Eckhart's clothes. He felt himself slipping when a bone-crushing grip closed around his arm. Dallas practically flung him into the *Marathon*'s cargo hold. The ramp slammed shut, and the engines shrieked through the hull as the ship broke the atmosphere.

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5

Eckhart sprang to his feet and took off through the *Marathon*'s corridors. He vaulted up the stairs to the upper deck and burst onto the bridge.

Alice was at a station to his left, working the controls in a mad frenzy. "They're sending battleships after us."

"Who is?" Eckhart dropped into his chair—the only one still fit for a human since the rest had been reworked by their occupants—and pulled his control panel toward him. "Where are they coming from?"

"They're launching from the southern mountains. They don't have any identifying signatures."

A creature covered in fur clambered onto a different workstation to the right of Eckhart's chair. The thing lacked legs of any kind; two big paddle-shaped feet stuck out of its rotund, shaggy body. Its spherical head perched on its body without a neck, and no features showed through the dense fur. Four antennae waved from the top of its head, but that was it.

Spindly fingers at the ends of its arms danced over the controls, and its chirpy voice came from somewhere in the middle of its body. "They're using Triorium drives. They belong to the Jackal Clan."

"We're getting out of here." Eckhart grabbed the regulators on either side of his chair. His right hand gripped the helm, and his left tightened on the firing mechanism that activated the ship's guns.

He hit the thrusters, and the *Marathon* rocketed away from Oskz. He raced skyward and burst into the stars, leaving the planet far behind him.

"They're coming up fast!" Alice called over her shoulder. "They're outrunning us."

"How?" Eckhart countered. "You said they were coming from the southern mountains."

"Another group is coming from Siatis," the little creature announced. "A third group is launching from Thinov. They're moving to cut us off. Prepare to repel—"

A blast of plasma hit the *Marathon* from the starboard side. The

little creature tumbled over herself, and barely managed to grasp the edge of her workstation to stop herself from pitching to the floor. She scrambled back onto the console and went to work even more frantically.

"Put up the tactical web," Eckhart called to Alice. "Rixby..."

The little creature had her back to Eckhart. She waddled over the controls on her workstation, stepped on some of them, and turned around to work the ones she'd just been standing on.

Another blast pelted the ship from port, followed by five more coming from starboard again. The commotion distracted Eckhart. He wheeled back to face forward as the holographic web flashed in front of his eyes.

The web filled the bridge and surrounded Eckhart's chair. He lost awareness of everything but the dozens of ships whizzing around the *Marathon*.

He yanked the ship hard to port and plastered the enemy with sheets of plasma. A curtain of fire and smoking gas filled the web, but that didn't stop him. He gunned the thrusters to maximum power and wheeled back toward the planet. These bastards had come to the right place if they wanted to play rough.

He drove the ship back into the enemy contingent. He plunged through them, blasting his guns on all sides, enjoying the satisfying thumps and pops as the Jackal Clan ships exploded around him.

They formed a corridor of destruction heading back to the planet. The *Marathon* tumbled head over heel with the speed of its direction changes, and the Jackal Clan couldn't keep up.

He dove back into the atmosphere. Drag slowed the ship down, but the enemy didn't have the same problem. They overtook the *Marathon* and hounded Eckhart in a death plunge for the surface.

Gunfire pounded the outer hull, and Eckhart activated the ship's Celdian shielding. Even then, the Jackal Clan's shots still impacted the *Marathon* a lot more than they should have. The enemy jostled the ship off its course with every shot.

"What's the problem?" he called to Alice over the noise. "Why isn't the Celdian protecting us?"

"It's the Triorium drive!" Rixby chirped from his other side. "They're charging their rockets with Triorium."

"That shouldn't be possible."

A devastating smash punched the ship from behind. That blow smacked the ship forward, and the engines stuttered.

Eckhart wheeled back to Rixby. “Find a way to overcome their Triorium drive.”

“How should I do that?” she squeaked.

“How should I know? You’re the one who knows everything. Find a way. I don’t care what you have to do.”

“There may be a way to—”

Punishing hammers of more rockets drowned out whatever she was about to say, and Eckhart concentrated all his attention on flying the ship.

He fired behind him a few times, but the ship was falling too fast. He switched his left hand to helm control, wrestling with the regulators to fight the ship out of its dive.

The desert streaked toward him on the tactical web. The town and the Jackal Clan’s compound rushed at his eyes. He gritted his teeth and dug deep, hauling the helm backward.

The *Marathon* screamed out of the sky on a collision course for the town when another blistering concussion struck the ship from behind.

“The Celdian is failing,” Alice reported. “We can’t take much more of this.”

That blow knocked the ship backward, and the nose tilted toward the horizon. Eckhart saw his chance and poured on the thrust with everything he had. The *Marathon* rocketed away in a blinding streak parallel to the ground and hurtled for the mountains.

“I have it!” Rixby piped. “I have the way—”

“Just do it!” Eckhart ordered. “I don’t need an explanation.”

“I’m arming the Datrium with Baswalt.”

“Baswalt!” Eckhart whipped around to stare at the little alien. “That’s—”

“I diverted it from the waste disposal system. The fermented excrement from the disposal tanks—”

“Don’t tell me how you did it! Just tell me what to do,” Eckhart demanded.

“I’m arming the Datrium with Baswalt. When you fire on the Jackal Clan, the plasma will—”

“Spare me the scientific lecture. Just tell me when!”

Rixby turned this way and that, tapping here and there on her workstation. The mountains loomed large before Eckhart’s eyes. The *Marathon*’s engines started to outrun the enemy again, but one

glance around showed him more groupings coming from all over the planet.

"Slow your trajectory," Rixby told him.

"No!" Eckhart countered. "They'll destroy us."

"The Datrium is charged and ready to launch. Let them catch up with you."

Eckhart had to force himself to slacken his grip on the thrusters. Letting the Jackal Clan catch up with him went against his most basic instincts, but he did it.

The *Marathon* streaked up the mountains with the Jackal Clan right on its tail, vaulting over the highest peak. At the apogee of its flight, the tactical web showed enemy ships converging from all sides.

Eckhart's gut commanded him to hit the thrusters and get out of there, but he held back. The enemy closed on the *Marathon*, and a deadly stillness settled over the bridge.

Eckhart's fingers itched to fire, but he held off. The pursuit rocketed up the mountains and laid into the *Marathon*'s shielded hull. He didn't need Alice to tell him the Celdian was getting weaker by the minute.

The two flanking enemy squadrons closed a dragnet the *Marathon* would never escape. The Jackal Clan ringed the ship in guns and tightened their blockade to seal the *Marathon*'s fate.

Rixby stopped what she was doing and stared into the tactical web. She no longer worked her controls while she and Alice waited for Eckhart to spring their trap.

Ships zoomed back and forth in front of the *Marathon*'s nose. Eckhart traced their flight with his weapons. Which one should he blow away first?

They were moving too fast for him to select just one, but he didn't have to. The *Marathon* made no effort to defend itself, and they turned to face the ship.

"Now," Rixby squeaked.

Eckhart yanked his hand away from the regulators and punched the emergency core dump near his elbow. A deafening alarm screeched through the bridge as the Datrium core dropped out of the ship's underside.

Eckhart ripped the helm backward, and the ship sprang out of the Jackal Clan's trap. He corkscrewed into the atmosphere, pivoted backward, and fired one plasma blast into the core.

The charged Datrium ruptured in a bone-shaking boom. The shockwave caught the *Marathon* and carried it far away from the blast zone. Burning debris peppered the hull, but they and the impact wave didn't overcome the Celdian.

Eckhart measured the *Marathon*'s rotation and, as soon as the ship's nose pointed away from the blast zone, he punched the thrusters and took off into space.

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6

Eckhart strode down the corridor with Alice on one side of him and Rixby on the other. “I’m sorry, Eckhart,” Rixby squeaked. “I thought those men were mercenaries shooting at you.”

“Forget it,” he said. “You did right.”

“I hope you plan to ditch ‘em,” Alice hissed. “They’re bad news.”

“Maybe. Whoever they are, they don’t belong out here.”

“They don’t belong on this ship, either,” Alice rasped through her mask. “You never should have brought them on board.”

“I’m not completely dead yet. It would have been our fault if they got caught by the mercenaries. I’m not ready to leave a helpless man bleeding on the ground when he’s about to get shot.”

“They were already helpless, and they’d already been shot by the mercenaries,” Alice pointed out. “That one didn’t get shot by accident, I promise you.”

Eckhart didn’t answer. He knew she was right. He shouldn’t have taken these two men on board. He and his crew had bigger problems from the Jackal Clan…and everybody else.

He hooked his armpits over the stairway railings and slid down to the lower deck. Rixby hopped onto one of the railings and slid down on her over-large feet. Alice trotted down the stairs in a more dignified fashion. She didn’t approve of going down stairs any other way.

Eckhart turned into the *Marathon*’s infirmary to find Bing bending over the man who’d been shot first. His friend sat on the second exam table and watched Bing’s every move. “Is he gonna be okay?”

“Besides having the recognition centers of his brains scrambled, he’ll be fine,” Bing replied. “He won’t know who he is, so you can convince him he’s anyone you want him to be. You can make him think he’s a chorus line girl from Imeliv H8 and rent him out to the highest bidder.”

The big guy watching jolted backward. “What? He can’t be! Do you realize who this is?”

Bing laughed in his gurgling voice, and Eckhart stepped in. “Give him a break, Bing. How is he?”

Bing got serious—well, as serious as he ever got. “He’s lost a lot of blood, but other than that, he still has all his working parts.”

Bing swiveled around the unconscious man’s head. He tipped back the patient’s skull, pried open the man’s jaw, and spat a sticky black goo into the man’s mouth.

“What the hell are you doing!” the guy’s friend bellowed. “Get away from him! Stop him!”

“He’s trying to save your useless friend,” Alice rasped. “Don’t you know a Yakit when you see one?”

“A what?”

“A Yakit,” Eckhart explained. “Their Eplite has healing properties. It will heal any internal injuries your boss suffered, and replace lost blood. The Yakit are the most prized aliens in the galaxy.”

Bing laughed again. “One of the most prized aliens in the galaxy! That’s me.”

“Why do you think we put up with your moronic jokes?” Alice snarled.

Eckhart opened his mouth to tell them to quit fooling around, but at that moment, the unconscious patient shot off the table with an agonized scream. He whipped right and left, trying to see everything at once.

His friend tried to clamber off his own table to grab him. “Take it easy, sir. You’re okay. We’re on board a ship. We’re okay. These people are giving you medical treatment.”

“Treatment—yes.” Bing shifted down to the guy’s legs. “Consideration—no.”

He spat another blob of the black tar onto the guy’s bullet wound, and the patient shrieked even louder. He tried to kick Bing away. “Get away from me! Don’t touch me.”

Alice and Eckhart sprang forward just in time. Eckhart pulled Bing out of the way, and Alice clamped the guy’s legs to the table with her unnaturally powerful grip. “Keep still, you bastard, or I’ll immobilize you a lot more than just knocking you out again.”

The friend on the other table groped for his pockets. “How dare you threaten him, alien scum! Where’s my weapon?”

“Are you looking for this?” Eckhart held up the sidearm he’d taken from him on the planet.

The man froze. “Give that back. It’s mine.”

“Not anymore. It’s mine now, just like everything else on this

ship."

"This is *your* ship? Then you'd better control these filthy aliens or we'll—"

"You're in no position to threaten anyone," Eckhart returned, "and in case you didn't notice, we just saved both your worthless lives. You aren't on Earth anymore, pal. You're on the fringes, and whoever you are and whatever you're worth on Earth means absolutely nothing out here."

The stranger's gaze skipped around the ring of faces. His expression changed from fury and revulsion to something more like hardened determination. He didn't act scared, but he definitely understood his situation better.

"Aliens!" the other man screeched. "Aliens! Filthy aliens."

Bing raised his many limbs and danced around in a caricature of himself. "Aliens! Aliens! We're all aliens."

As if the situation couldn't get any more ridiculous, Dallas stomped in at that moment. "I just finished checking the hull integrity and it's fully intact, but the Celdian is depleted. The Datrium core is also critically low. We won't be able to defend ourselves until we replace that, too."

"We can replace both easily enough from our reserves," Eckhart replied. "We got plenty on our last visit to Sohiri."

"That will likely use all our remaining stock," Dallas replied.

"What the holy living hell is *that*?"

The broken whisper came from the first guy, the one who'd tried to kick Bing for healing his leg.

Dallas, Eckhart, Bing, Alice, and Rixby all turned around to glare at their two passengers. For the first time, the two men didn't sling insults or threats. They didn't say anything.

Eckhart stepped closer to the tables, where both men sat transfixed by fear and confusion. "Who are you? What are you doing on the fringes?"

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7

“Don’t tell him anything,” the first man croaked. “He’s nobody.”

“I’m your best friend, pal,” Eckhart told him. “You better start talking. Give me one reason not to jettison both of you into space right now.”

The first man drew himself up—or tried to. “Who are *you*? If anyone is going to issue orders around here, it will be me.”

Eckhart couldn’t help but laugh in the guy’s face. “I’m Adam Eckhart. Are you happy now? Now it’s your turn. Who are you, and what were you doing on Oskz?”

“That’s none of your business. Learn some manners when addressing your betters. I demand that you take us to a safe location where we can secure transport back to the Sol system.”

“And where would that be?” Eckhart asked. “What do you call a safe location?”

The guy checked himself for a second. “Why—the nearest Regiment station, of course. The Regiment will protect us from...” His gaze trailed away from Eckhart’s face and the guy blanched when he spotted Dallas, Bing, Rixby, and Alice all staring at him.

“I hate to break it to you, pal, but the Regiment doesn’t hold much influence out here,” Eckhart informed him. “Even if I took you to the nearest Regiment station—which would take way too long—you might not be safe there. The Regiment doesn’t have much to do with the fringes.”

“That’s a lie!” the guy shrieked. “The Regiment is responsible for keeping the peace in all Earth-controlled regions.”

Bing burst out laughing, and this time, Dallas and Alice joined in. Eckhart bit back a grin. “You’ve been spending way too much time on Earth, my friend.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? The Regiment is the best-funded peacekeeping force in the galaxy. They’re tasked with protecting Earth’s interests on the fringes and beyond.”

“Earth and its solar system are a long way away, my friend, and whatever Earth does and thinks and wants doesn’t bear on life out here. If you ever bothered to leave your comfortable homeworld, you would realize that.”

“But—”

Eckhart held up his hand to silence the guy. “Earth is ruled by the expanding human population. Law and order and all the functions of government…these are things that exist on Earth and in its solar system. They don’t mean much out here.”

“But,” the guy stammered. “But *you’re* human.”

“Look around you, pal. I’m one man in a roomful of aliens. This is how it is on the fringes. The Regiment might be well-funded, but it can’t patrol everywhere. The Regiment’s funding comes from Earth, so the Regiment’s efforts start at Earth and radiate out from there.”

“What does that mean?” the second man interrupted. “Are you saying the Regiment isn’t out here at all?”

Eckhart shrugged. “They’re here. They just don’t try very hard.”

“Or at all,” Dallas cut in.

“They wouldn’t dare,” Alice hissed.

“They know which side their bread is buttered on,” Bing explained. “They know they can’t control all the filthy, disgusting, lawless aliens, so they concentrate on what they *can* control.”

“Which is Earth,” Dallas added.

“And its solar system,” Rixby chirped.

“And those near it who can pay,” Alice finished.

“You’d be lucky to find a Regiment station out this far,” Eckhart told them. “Aliens rule out here, and as you can see, Earthlings are the minority.”

“That’s putting it mildly,” Bing chimed in.

“But you own this ship,” the first man pointed out. “These… these *things*…they must obey you.”

“We’re friends,” Eckhart told them. “This is my ship and I’m in charge, but they don’t ‘obey’ anyone, least of all me.”

The four crewmates laughed again, and Eckhart smiled at them fondly. The idea of any of them obeying him was too funny to take seriously.

Their laughter startled the two patients more than ever. Eckhart couldn’t resist the urge to laugh at them, too. They were beyond naïve.

“Did you seriously think you could just waltz out to the fringes and start throwing your status around?” he asked them. “You might be the ruling class on Earth, but out here, you’re nothing. Your lives aren’t worth spit unless you have something to trade.”

“Or some skills to sell,” Dallas added.

“Or money,” Bing added.

“I have money,” the first man grumbled.

“Where is it?” Bing asked. “Are you gonna pay us to take you to the nearest Regiment station?”

“Are you going to pay us for saving your asses back on Oskz?” Alice asked.

The man did his best to put a brave face on. “We have to report what happened. Those crooks on Oskz shot me and tried to rob us. We have to report them to the Regiment. They’ll arrest the perpetrators and—”

“Aren’t you *listening*?” Eckhart cut in. “The Regiment doesn’t give a damn about anything that happens on the fringes. The Regiment doesn’t know or care about what the Jackal Clan does on Oskz, and they wouldn’t intervene if they did know.”

“But it’s illegal!” the guy exclaimed. “They’re supposed to enforce the law.”

“If any Earthling is stupid enough to travel this far out, they’re on their own,” Eckhart said. “The same goes for me, and the same goes for you.” He started to turn back to his crew. “Lay in a course for Chanus so we can deliver—”

“You can’t do this!” the second man cut in. “Do you know who we are?”

“No one cares who you are,” Alice snarled.

“If you don’t take us somewhere we can contact the Regiment to come and get us, we’ll report you. We’ll get you jailed or even executed.”

“I warned you.” Alice swiveled around the table and grabbed his elbow. “You’re out of here, scumbag. You’ll make a nice speedbump for a passing freighter to avoid when you’re floating around in space.”

“You can’t do this!” the guy roared. “I’m a retired captain in the Regiment. I can call in attack ships to—”

Dallas stepped between him and Eckhart. “A retired captain? I’m a major and I’m *not* retired. I’m still active duty…technically.”

The guy shrank before Dallas’ bulk. “That’s impossible. You’re a freak.”

“I’m as human as you are.”

“At least, he was,” Bing interjected.

Both strangers curled their lips in disgust at Dallas, but his

helmeted head appeared as impassive as ever. “I did my duty to Earth and the Regiment. I was injured in the Battle of Borth, but the Regiment only partially rehabilitated me. They wanted to pack me off to a long-term care facility as a crippled blob with no arms or legs.”

“Kind of like Rixby,” Bing cut in.

“I escaped to the fringes. I hacked the money from a Regiment investment fund to get my body rebuilt with these robotic prosthetics, but I’m still on the Regiment’s active-duty roster. They didn’t take me off it when I went AWOL.”

Eckhart patted Dallas’ huge armored shoulder. “Their loss is our gain.”

“If you’re attached to the Regiment,” the second guy returned, “then you should know the importance of maintaining the standard hierarchical protocol—”

“You need to dump those attitudes real fast if you want to survive on the fringes,” Dallas replied. “Nothing will get you killed faster than trying to ‘maintain the standard hierarchical protocol’ out here.”

Eckhart prepared himself to ask again who these guys were when Rixby interrupted. She waddled forward with an excited chirp.

“I know who they are!”

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8

All eyes turned to Rixby.

"Well?" Dallas asked.

"This is Coleman DeWalt." She waved her antennae at the first man. "He's a wealthy banker from Earth's financial sector, and this…" She indicated the second man. "This is his bodyguard, Blake Clifton."

"Is that true?" Eckhart asked, and immediately recognized that it was. DeWalt tried to bluster, and Clifton looked away.

"What is *that* thing?" DeWalt sneered at Rixby. "How does it know so much about us?"

"Her name is Rixby," Eckhart replied. "You might have more money than brains, but she has more brains than money. She has instant perfect recall of everything she's ever read, seen, and heard. What more can you tell us about them, Rixby?"

"DeWalt is the son of Truman DeWalt, the founder and head of United Collateral Bank, the biggest financial institution on Earth. It funds the Regiment and dozens of colonies throughout the Sol system."

"And this is his son?" Bing waved his limbs at DeWalt. "Let's squeeze him and see if any money comes out."

"Coleman DeWalt inherited his wealth and joined the family corporation at a young age," Rixby went on. "He's never been reported outside the Sol system…until now, it seems. Clifton is a Regiment veteran, and he makes a very good salary following DeWalt around. He's only been outside the Sol system on maneuvers and campaigns with the Regiment. He has fought alien species and killed … plenty."

"Bastard!" Alice growled.

"I did what I did," Clifton countered. "What else was I supposed to do?"

"So what were you doing on Oskz?" Eckhart asked. "How did you get shot?"

The two men exchanged a glance, and DeWalt clamped his lips shut.

"You might as well tell us," Dallas prompted. "We're gonna find

out sooner or later, and if you tell us, we might be able to help you."

"Or not," Bing added.

"We might dump you in space," Alice went on.

DeWalt hunched his shoulders and pinched his mouth more tightly closed. Clifton, at least, returned Eckhart's gaze and didn't turn away, but he didn't volunteer any information, either.

Eckhart threw up his hands. "Whatever. This is a waste of time. Set course for Chanus. We'll make delivery, collect our bounty, and drop these two jokers there. They'll be lucky to make it back to Earth alive in their condition."

"Wait!" DeWalt shrieked. "Don't!"

Eckhart raised his eyebrows at him. "Give me one reason why I shouldn't."

"Okay!" DeWalt exclaimed. "I went to Oskz to pay off a contact about stealing an Oksite crystal."

Eckhart stiffened. Rixby tugged at his pant leg to get his attention, but he chopped his hand to silence her.

"Our contact was supposed to steal the crystal from a criminal organization's vault," DeWalt went on. "This criminal organization stole the crystal from a Regiment installation. I was supposed to be on hand when they brought the crystal to town. They were going to give me the crystal, and I was supposed to hand over the money. There. Now you know everything."

Rixby tugged Eckhart's pant leg harder, but he ignored her. His senses prickled. Had his client hired a second party to steal the crystal?

"So whoever you were working for put this thief up to stealing the crystal? Who was the original client?"

"No, no," DeWalt insisted. "It wasn't like that. My organization sent them to steal it. They didn't put up anyone or anything. All the payment was supposed to happen afterward—after delivery."

"What organization?" Dallas asked. "Who were you working for?"

"The crystal was going to Trinity Code. It's an interplanetary conglomerate centered on Saturn. They plan to use it to generate a new form of energy, to create a form of semi-teleportation travel that would make space flight obsolete. It would revolutionize the whole system. People could travel as fast as thought. Journeys that took months or years would take a matter of seconds, if that."

Eckhart looked down at Rixby. “Do you know anything about this?”

Her antennae wavered. “I’ve never heard of it. Oksite is generally too unstable to generate any steady flow of energy. Most energy manipulation causes it to explode.”

Another ripple of tension went through Eckhart. He pulled the crystal out of his pocket and held it up for the others to see. “This was in my pocket when I fell on the ramp. It’s been bumped and banged around all afternoon. It didn’t explode.”

“You’d be a chorus girl on Imeliv H8 if it did,” Bing chimed in.

“Banging it around makes no difference,” Rixby informed him. “It’s stable in its inert form. It has to be triggered with an additional energy charge to make it blow. The Regiment must want it for some kind of weapon.”

“I’m telling you the truth!” DeWalt cried. “My organization sent me out here to retrieve the crystal. It’s the only one of its kind in this sector.”

“That isn’t strictly true,” Rixby countered. “There’s an Oksite mine on Aurata. Oksite dust is used in warheads, but I don’t remember any record of a specimen this large.”

“So it’s an explosive,” Alice remarked. “How do they plan to harness the energy to turn it into a method of transportation?”

Rixby turned back to DeWalt. “What wavelength of energy do they need to power your transport module?”

He wrinkled his nose at her even more. “How should I know? I’m a banker. I don’t deal with that stuff.”

“I don’t believe such an experiment would work,” Rixby told Eckhart. “The wavelengths and frequencies required…”

“He’s a messenger boy,” Alice sneered. “He’s disposable.”

Eckhart sighed. “Let’s get moving, everyone.” He turned and strode off down the main corridor. As the others fell in behind, he did his best to block out DeWalt’s protests.

“Don’t do this!”

“I’m doing it.”

“You can’t!”

“I think you’ll find that I can.”

“I can pay!” DeWalt cried. “You won’t regret it.”

“I already do,” Eckhart growled over his shoulder. “Don’t make me regret it even more.”

“You can’t do this! You have to take us to the Regiment. This

crystal belongs to them. They might charge you for stealing it."

"I didn't steal it from the Regiment. For all I know, my client wants to buy the crystal to return it to the Regiment. Did you ever think of that?"

"Don't *do* this!" DeWalt cried. "I'm begging you."

"Do us all a favor and don't start begging," Dallas cut in. "You're already as despicable as you can possibly be. Don't make yourself pathetic into the bargain."

"What can we expect once we get down on the planet?" Clifton asked from behind.

"Nothing much," Bing replied. "Just the usual…shootouts…"

"Kidnappings," Alice husked behind her mask.

"Don't forget torture and pillage," Rixby added.

"You can't do this!" DeWalt shrieked. "Do you know who I am?"

Eckhart entered the bridge and went to his station. He sat down and tapped out a few coordinates into the instruments next to his regulators, ignoring Clifton and DeWalt completely. Dallas and Bing kept an eye on them.

"What are the atmospheric conditions on Chanus?"

Alice sat down at her station, and Rixby clambered onto her workstation the way she usually did. "The gas is especially thick today. Take a position over the Pilara continent and we might be able to get a message through."

"Good enough." Eckhart kicked the engines to life and took off into deep space. "Let's get this job done."

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PART 2

A JOB IS A JOB

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9

As they entered orbit over Chanus, the planet's surface seethed with clouds of toxic gas. No one could see the surface through the murk. "How's it looking, Rixby?"

"One moment."

"You don't actually trust that thing, do you?" DeWalt muttered.

"I trust her a lot more than I trust you." Eckhart checked his instruments again, but he didn't see anything.

"There!" Rixby chirped. "Send now."

Eckhart activated his communications channel. "This is derelict scow *Marathon* requesting entry to deliver freight cargo."

The tactical web flickered on to reveal the gruesome face of a greenish-blue alien. Finger-like tentacles extended from its face in a steady waving pattern that seemed to grope toward the viewer.

"Derelict scow! That's a good one, Eckhart."

"I do my best to keep you entertained, Vuldak. So what about taking delivery of my freight cargo?"

"Absolutely. I can't think of anything I'd rather do—unless it's your other freight cargo."

"What freight cargo?" Alice asked.

"Those two chumps behind you—the slugs."

Eckhart actually turned around and looked before he understood that Vuldak meant Clifton and DeWalt. "Them? They aren't freight cargo. They're barnacles."

Vuldak laughed. "I know, but the price for them is even higher than for the crystal. What do you say? Keep the crystal and sell it on the black market. You could make a mint on it. Just hand over the slugs for your full fee."

"If they're worth more than the crystal, then you should be offering a higher fee for them."

"Hey!" DeWalt cried. "You can't!"

Dallas clamped his powerful metal hand over the guy's mouth, but Eckhart paid no attention. He narrowed his eyes at the image in front of him. "Why's the price so high? Who wants him?"

"How should I know? What difference does it make? He's worth at least fifteen and a half."

A chill ran up Eckhart's spine. "Is that so?"

"What do you say, Eckhart? You'll get double pay for handing over the slugs and then selling the crystal. You can't ask for better than that."

"Okay, I'll do it. Send through coordinates for landing." He closed the connection.

"You can't do this!" DeWalt screeched. "You can't hand us over to some petty thug!"

Eckhart stood up and pointed at the workstation under Rixby's large feet. "Get on the system and find out everything you can about DeWalt, the crystal, Trinity Code, and this space travel experiment they plan to run."

He turned away. Now he couldn't avoid confronting Clifton and DeWalt any longer. Instead of yelling and insisting that Eckhart couldn't do this, DeWalt gazed at him with a tremulous expression.

Dallas let him go, but DeWalt didn't argue or try to pull rank. He just stared at Eckhart with a searching look. That look unsettled Eckhart more than all the arguments in the world.

He headed to the Crick centrifuge attached under the ship's left wing. Not many people knew about this aftermarket modification. It gave the ship added stability so it could make high-speed evasive turns.

He crawled inside and busied himself adjusting it down to the micron. He'd spent so much time working on the ship that it had become something like a monastic discipline for him. Geeking out on the ship's many adaptations helped clear his thoughts, but it didn't help him much now. The more he thought about the conversation he'd just had, the more it bothered him.

He worked on the centrifuge for almost forty-five minutes before Dallas stuck his head through the cavity. "Eckhart! Are you hiding in there?"

"I'm not hiding," Eckhart lied. "I'm thinking."

"Are you really gonna hand those two to Vuldak Dhaddet?"

"I still haven't decided. Galaxy knows we could use the extra money."

"Handing them over would certainly get them off our hands," Rixby chimed in.

Eckhart sat up and peered out of the cavity. He hadn't seen Rixby before, because she was too short to see into the opening. She didn't even come up to Dallas' waist.

“What did you find out about everything?” Eckhart asked.

“Only what we already know. DeWalt is exactly who I said he was, and we already know everything about the crystal.”

“Can it be used to generate some kind of instantaneous space travel?”

“If it can, the experiment must be based on some research that hasn’t been made public yet. As far as I can tell, Oksite is too unstable for anything like that. No one can get any energy flow from it—not without blowing it up.”

“What about the conglomerate DeWalt belongs to?”

“He doesn’t belong to the conglomerate,” Rixby replied. “I can’t find anything in the database to indicate why they chose him for this job.”

“Is his father part of the conglomerate?” Dallas asked.

“No, not even that,” Rixby chirped. “Neither DeWalt nor his father ever had anything to do with the conglomerate before his job.”

“Why did they pick him to come out and throw his life away?” Dallas asked.

“Maybe they were trying to get rid of him.” Eckhart put his tools back in their case and climbed out of the cavity. “Did you get the coordinates for landing?”

“Not yet. The atmosphere is still too volatile.”

Eckhart straightened up in front of his friends and wiped his hands on a rag. “So?” Dallas prompted. “Are you gonna hand them over to Vuldak?”

“I don’t know. Something doesn’t add up here.”

Eckhart started walking back toward the bridge, but talking to his friends didn’t help him make this decision any more than working on the ship did. If anything, it only clarified all the questions that remained unanswered.

“The conglomerate wants the crystal, and the Regiment must want to get the crystal back. I can understand why they’d offer a high price for it. Considering how rare a crystal this size is, I can understand why every criminal on the fringes would want to get their hands on it, too.”

“So why’s Vuldak offering an even higher price for DeWalt?” Dallas finished. “Why is he willing to let go of the crystal to get his hands on DeWalt?”

“Exactly. From everything we can find out about him, DeWalt is

a boil on the backside of the galaxy. He isn't worth anything. The conglomerate sent him out here to get the crystal. Once they get that, DeWalt should be expendable."

"Maybe his father put up a price to get him back," Dallas suggested.

"That would show up on the database," Rixby countered. "There's no evidence his father even knows where he is."

Eckhart shook his head. "This is weird."

"You still haven't said whether you're going to hand him over."

Eckhart shrugged. "I'll let you know as soon as I decide."

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10

Eckhart made his way back toward the bridge with Dallas and Rixby in tow, but when the three reached the lower deck, Clifton appeared from the infirmary and planted himself in front of Eckhart.

“Can I have a word with you?”

“Go ahead. I’m all ears.”

Clifton glanced from Dallas to Rixby, and back to Eckhart. “Can I have a word with you *alone*?”

“If you’re going to offer him a bunch of money to take you to the nearest Regiment station,” Dallas cut in, “you can do that in front of us. What happens to this ship affects us, too.”

The faintest hint of derision winked in Clifton’s face at being addressed by someone he considered a freak, but he erased it instantly. He addressed himself to Eckhart. “Well? Can I talk to you in private?”

“I’ll let you know when we have landing coordinates, Eckhart.” Rixby waddled away and disappeared up the stairs.

Dallas didn’t move. He and Clifton stared at each other—or at least Clifton stared at Dallas’ blank helmet. He couldn’t know if Dallas was staring at him or at something else.

Clifton finally looked away. “Fine. We can talk later.”

“You can talk to him now. I have better things to do than listen to you grovel for your lives.” Dallas trooped away. His heavy metal feet clanged on the stairs and faded.

Clifton fidgeted until the sound died away. “You have a very dedicated crew.”

“They’re dedicated to making a living,” Eckhart replied. “He’s right. Whatever decision I make affects them. They have a right to involve themselves in those decisions.”

“It’s more than that,” Clifton replied. “They listen to you. They trust you.”

“I earned their trust. I care as much about their interests as they do. They know I wouldn’t do anything to put them in danger…like keeping a pair of troublemakers on board when we could earn a nice fat haul by selling you to the first broker that wants you.”

The words stung Clifton, and he jolted upright fast. “If it’s a question of money, we can make it up to you. My boss has more money than your client has ever seen.”

“It isn’t a question of money. I have a reputation in this sector. I get the job done. When someone hires me to do something, I deliver. If I backed out on this, word would spread that I let my client down.”

“There’s more.” Clifton lowered his voice to a whisper as if someone might overhear him. “My boss, he knows people on Earth—powerful people. He could get you out of this mess. He could find you a place in the Sol system, or the Regiment—whatever you want. You’re fully human. You wouldn’t have to slum it out here on the fringes anymore.”

Eckhart had expected this. Even so, he felt a flare of anger. He leveled the man with an appraising gaze. “Is that it? Did your boss send you over here to tell me that—to offer to take me back to Earth in exchange for helping him out?”

“That’s right. Humans need to stick together. I don’t know what brought you out here, but—”

“No,” Eckhart snapped. “You don’t.”

“You can do better than hanging around with a bunch of alien scum. You obviously have transferrable skills and leadership abilities. You’ve been running this ship as a kind of business. You could turn those skills to something useful, and a lot more profitable. My boss could make that happen. All you have to do is—”

“All I have to do is walk away from my job, screw over the guy that hired me, abandon the people who got me where I am, and kiss your boss’s ass. Right?”

Clifton blanched. “It isn’t like that.”

“It’s exactly like that. We’re done here.”

Eckhart pushed past Clifton and headed for the bridge. He wasn’t surprised when Clifton hurried after him. “Think about it. It isn’t too late to do the right thing.”

“Tell your boss he’s a piece of shit coward for sending you to tell me that instead of telling me to my face.”

Eckhart made it all the way to the stairs before he realized that Clifton wasn’t with him anymore. The guy hadn’t hounded him the rest of the way down the corridor.

He glanced back, just out of curiosity. Clifton stood in the same

place, and his countenance spasmed with some kind of hidden pain.

"What's your problem?" Eckhart asked. "Are you not used to rejection or something?"

Clifton gave a half-shrug, half pained convulsion. "I…already told him."

"You told him what?" Eckhart asked.

"I told him sending me would make it worse." Clifton jerked his shoulder backward again. "He doesn't get it. He's…he just doesn't get it."

Eckhart burst out laughing at that. "You got yourself a real peach there, man."

He turned away and started climbing the stairs. His laughter seemed to soften Clifton, and the man climbed up behind him. "What can you tell me about this Vuldak character?"

"He's a middleman. He's a nobody. He buys from here and sells to there. That's all you need to know about him."

"So he won't….*do* anything to us?"

"Do anything? You mean like kill you or torture you or sell you to the pimps? Well, he might sell you to anybody. He'll sell you to whoever's paying the highest price, but he won't kill or torture you. He doesn't do that. He'll just sell you to whoever wants to do it."

"If that's the case, maybe my boss can buy him off."

"Probably. If your boss is as rich as you say he is, Vuldak would definitely listen to a decent offer. Just take my advice and keep all that stuff about alien scum and humans-have-to-stick-together out of it. Vuldak will kill you for sure if he hears you talking like that. You're a commodity. That's all."

Clifton halted on the upper deck and smiled at Eckhart. "Thanks. I appreciate it."

That smile did something to Eckhart's insides. He shouldn't start to care about these two stuck-up humans. He *didn't* care about them, but so many disconnected threads wound themselves through this mystery that he didn't feel right passing them off to Vuldak—not like this, at least.

Eckhart crossed to a locker next to the bridge entrance, then stopped. He sighed and rubbed his temples. "Your boss might not get it, but I think *you* do. Can I trust you not to do something stupid?"

Clifton frowned. "Like what?"

Eckhart opened the locker and pulled out two sidearms. He

pushed them into Clifton's hands. "Take these, but don't use them unless you absolutely have to. Vuldak is a businessman. Reason with him first."

Clifton gazed down at the guns in his hands. When he looked up and met his eye, Eckhart could see the mental calculations going on. He could threaten Eckhart or bargain with him or try to take him prisoner, but he knew how that would end, especially after they'd already alienated the entire crew.

"Nothing stupid," Eckhart repeated.

Clifton's expression spasmed even more. "Thank you. I won't forget this."

"We'll see about that," he murmured. "If you don't both end up dead."

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11

Eckhart entered the bridge. “Any word from Vuldak?”

“The coordinates just came through.” Rixby scurried around on top of her workstation. “The entrance zone is over the Debros continent.”

“Perfect.” Eckhart flung himself into his seat. “The sooner we get this over with, the better.”

He steered the ship over to the Debros continent and positioned the *Marathon* over the coordinates, searching the gas cloud for any sign of an opening. The minutes ticked by. “What’s the problem? Where’s the weakness?”

Rixby tapped at her controls. “I don’t see—”

A scream vibrated through the hull, and Eckhart’s hands flew to his regulators. He switched on the tactical web without thinking. “What the hell was that?”

“Rockets coming from the surface!” Alice replied. “They’re shooting through the gas.”

“How is that possible?” Eckhart swiveled his guns back and forth across the murk, but he couldn’t see a thing. The atmosphere was too damn thick.

“The coordinates!” Rixby squeaked. “They’re shooting at the coordinates.”

“We’re getting out of here!” Eckhart ripped the ship away and ten more rockets streaked through the tactical web, all aiming for the coordinates where the *Marathon* had just waited. “Where are they coming from?”

“I can’t detect anything,” Alice replied. “The atmosphere’s blocking all visibility.”

“To hell with it!” Eckhart wheeled the ship hard to starboard and punched the thrusters. The *Marathon* hurtled away and flew headlong into a mob of ships vaulting out of the atmosphere right in front of it.

Eckhart veered just in time to avoid a collision. “What the hell!”

“They’re launching from inside the gas!” Alice rasped. “They were targeting the coordinates, but they’re diverting to follow us now.”

“Who’s sending ‘em?”

“They all have Immortals insignia,” Rixby announced.

Eckhart froze, rooted to his chair. He stared into the tactical web. “The Immortals!”

“What are they doing shooting at *us*?” Alice asked.

A volley of plasma fire ricocheted across the *Marathon*’s bow and clipped the Celdian shielding. The blow snapped Eckhart out of his trance. He pulled the ship away from Chanus and pelted into the vacuum of space, but the enemy only followed.

“Another formation is moving to cut us off,” Rixby reported.

“What?” Alice spun around to stare at Rixby. “How can they be? What are they…?”

More gunfire pounded the shielding and Eckhart blocked out the rest of their conversation. The Immortals coming out to attack the *Marathon* shouldn’t be possible.

The Immortals were one of the worst criminal syndicates in the sector, but Eckhart had always stayed on good terms with them. Besides, they usually kept to their own territory around the Agradis Nebula. They never left it, unless something made it worth their while.

He didn’t have time to think about that right now. Even if he did, he didn’t like the inevitable conclusions it led him to.

He considered changing course to avoid them and instantly changed his mind. He tightened his grip on the thrusters and gunned the engines straight into the Immortals’ formation.

He drove the *Marathon* into the heart of the mob, aiming the ship for as many enemy vessels as he could reach, and savored the satisfying boom of the shielding smashing their hulls.

He left a trail of explosions in his wake and fired on all sides. The Immortals wheeled to pursue him and he put on speed. Either he would run into more of them coming to help or, if they were all already in the air, he might find some breathing space.

He slingshotted around, searching everywhere for the next assault. The Immortals hounded him away from Chanus, but the *Marathon* outran them.

“Where are they?” Alice asked. “Where are they hiding?”

Eckhart scanned the tactical web for the slightest sign of movement. He didn’t dare to breathe.

“The way is clear,” Rixby announced. “I suggest we make for Drao. They won’t—”

Eckhart's gaze skipped to the left just in time to see a giant surge of ships swinging around the planet in a high orbit. He faltered for a second. Where were they all coming from?

"Silent Death!" Rixby screeched.

"What?" Eckhart whipped around. "They aren't Silent Death. Silent Death uses Nathlatine drives."

"Not there!" Rixby shrieked. "*There*!"

She waved her antennae at the other side of the web. Eckhart had been so distracted by the ships in orbit that he hadn't seen a new contingent appearing from deep space.

His heart plummeted into his stomach. The Nathlatine gave a ghostly green readout on the tactical web. It spread over the image with the slow, creeping inevitability of silent death.

"Get out of here, Eckhart!" Alice snarled.

He read the battlefield with a single glance. The Immortals closed from behind, while Silent Death sandwiched the *Marathon* between their spreading flank and that other mysterious army coming from orbit. Eckhart couldn't even identify them, but that hardly mattered.

He had one chance at this, and he drove the engines to the breaking point. The two flanking groups reacted just as fast. They hurtled for the *Marathon* and closed the ship in a sea of destruction.

Shots pummeled the *Marathon* off course. So many blasts exploded across the tactical web that Eckhart couldn't tell anymore if he was even flying in a straight line. "Divert power to the Celdian!"

"No!" Alice bellowed. "You can't!"

"Do it now!"

He didn't have time to find out if she obeyed him. If the *Marathon* stayed here, the three converging armies would wear down the Celdian until they rendered the ship defenseless. "Dump the Datrium core!" he yelled over the noise.

"The core is out!" Rixby squealed. "Fire the last charge!"

"Where is it?" Eckhart called. "I can't see anything."

He didn't have to shoot. The enemy bombarded the *Marathon* with countless shots, and a catastrophic concussion hit the ship as the Datrium core detonated.

The impact caught the ship and hurled the *Marathon* back toward Chanus. Eckhart rode the momentum. He didn't have much choice, with propulsion nearly gone. The ship wheeled into the

atmosphere. The tactical web failed, and he struggled to gain any kind of control as the ship smashed down hard on the planet's surface.

Eckhart picked himself up off the floor and coughed. Smoke and dust filled the bridge. "Alice! Rixby! Are you there?"

Alice's husky voice reached him from out of sight. "I'm here."

Her strong hands closed on his arms, and she hauled him to his feet. As soon as he stood up, his head emerged above the smoke. A layer of clean air hung suspended above it and left the bridge clear.

Rixby stood on her workstation, tapping at the controls. "How bad is the damage?" Eckhart asked.

"The Celdian shielding took the brunt of the hit. The hull is undamaged."

"What about the engines? Do we have the propulsion to get out of here?"

"We have propulsion, but no Datrium. We can't see through the atmosphere. If any enemy ships survived the blast, they'll be waiting for us out there."

"Which means we won't be able to defend ourselves," Alice added. "Showing ourselves outside the atmosphere would alert them to our location. They could come after us again."

"We have to chance it. We aren't getting any more Datrium on this planet."

"We have bigger problems," Alice snarled. "The Immortals, the Silent Death, and the Chosen are all gunning for us now."

"The Chosen!" Eckhart exclaimed.

"I identified them right before the blast. The third flank was the Chosen—or someone using their ships."

Eckhart moved over to his chair and sat down. "If the Chosen are looking for us, then nowhere is safe."

Just then, Dallas and Bing burst onto the bridge. "Eckhart!" Dallas called. "Is everyone okay?"

"We're fine. Are the passengers still alive?"

"Not for long," Alice growled.

"Don't you want to drop them off?" Bing asked. "Wasn't that our plan?"

"That *was* our plan, before Vuldak used those coordinates to try to blow us out of the sky. You two might want to secure yourselves. We might be flying right back into it."

Eckhart fired up the engines. They worked perfectly. The ship

still had about half its Celdian load. The crash had drained the fresh supply the *Marathon* collected from Sohiri. Even that wouldn't last long, with three of the most vicious crime syndicates gunning for their blood.

Eckhart lifted the ship off the planet's surface. He didn't relish flying blind through the atmosphere, but with luck, the blast cleared the way for him.

He eased higher into the atmosphere and bobbed out of the gas clouds. The tactical web cleared as soon as they reached orbit. The broad expanse of space was clear...for the moment.

"They'll be back," Alice murmured. "They'll send more ships."

She was right. Whatever had lured the Immortals, the Chosen, and the Silent Death to come after the *Marathon* didn't just disappear. Those three organizations would continue hunting the ship until they found it.

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12

Eckhart increased speed, and the ship held up fine. He finally tore his gaze away from the tactical web and searched the ship's systems for any trace of damage, but he couldn't find any. He hardly dared to believe his good fortune.

He laid in a course for Sohiri again, but when he came within a hundred parsecs of the supply post, he picked up a slow pulse coming from the planet.

"The emergency beacon," Alice said. "It's coming from Skarekd's outpost."

Eckhart circled the planet in a careful searching pattern. "Are any of the other beacons activated?"

"There are two—one coming from Threl and one from Shudi."

"Damn it! Where else do we have?"

"Banok?" Alice suggested.

"Taio," Rixby added.

"Taio it is." Eckhart pulled the ship out of orbit with a heavy heart. If three of his contacts on Sohiri were sending out emergency beacons, the enemy must have gotten here first.

He flew a long distance out of his way to avoid meeting anyone he might have to fight. With no Datrium on board, the *Marathon*'s weapons would be useless.

When he finally got near Taio, neither Alice nor Rixby had to tell him. He could see four emergency beacons pulsating from the surface.

He turned away, feeling worse than ever. The *Marathon* wouldn't be able to do anything without Datrium.

He finally headed into the Vox asteroid belt and set the ship down on the biggest rock he could find. He concealed the ship in a cavern and left the bridge.

Alice and Rixby accompanied him to the galley, where they found Dallas and Bing standing guard over the two passengers. "Well, Mr. DeWalt," Eckhart began. "You'll be happy to know you have three of the most dangerous criminal organizations in the galaxy all trying to kill you."

"And they're all made up of aliens," Alice added.

“That’s impossible!” DeWalt cried. “No one wants to kill me.”

“Oh, yes, they do.” Eckhart counted on his fingers. “Let me see if I got this straight. The Jackal Clan tried to kill you on Oskz. Someone offered Vuldak a pile of cash to capture you, and then they brought in not one, not two, but *three* crime syndicates to shoot down this ship. Why?”

“I don’t know! How should I know? I’m—”

“You’re worthless,” Alice interrupted.

“You’re brainless,” Bing added.

“You’re spineless,” Dallas finished.

DeWalt rounded on Clifton. “Say something! Are you just gonna stand there and let them talk to me like this?”

“You’re worth more than the crystal,” Eckhart said calmly. “Why?”

“No one wants to kill me!” DeWalt practically shrieked. “I never hurt anyone in my life! I’m a good person. I’ve worked hard and kept my nose clean. I’ve never even been charged with a crime.”

Alice let out a sick laugh. “That’s nothing to be proud of, chump.”

“The Immortals, the Chosen, and Silent Death,” Eckhart began again.

“Who’s that?” Clifton asked.

“The three organizations I mentioned. They were all willing to blow up the crystal to get rid of you.”

“Maybe they weren’t,” Dallas suggested. “Maybe they didn’t want to kill him. Maybe they wanted to cripple the ship and drive it to the ground so they could capture these two.”

“Why would they bring out so many ships if they only wanted to do that?” Rixby asked.

“Maybe they know about the *Marathon*’s modifications,” Alice replied. “If someone tipped them off about the Celdian…”

“Celdian!” Clifton cut in. “Celdian is a Class-17 military-grade defense-restricted element. No one outside the Regiment is supposed to be using it.”

“You aren’t in Regiment-controlled space anymore,” Dallas countered.

Alice chuckled. “So much for that squeaky-clean reputation of yours. Would you like to hear about the *Marathon*’s other modifications?”

“My point,” Dallas went on, “is that if someone told them we

had Celdian shielding, they might think they needed that many ships to ground us."

"If their goal was to ground us so they could take these two alive," Eckhart pointed out, "they wouldn't have risked killing us all in the process. Besides, Vuldak would have had us on the ground regardless. All they had to do was wait and take these two from Vuldak."

"*If* you handed them over, you mean," Dallas corrected.

"No one wants to kill me!" DeWalt screeched. "That's preposterous! I'm a respected businessman! I'm an executive in the United Collateral Bank! I'm—"

"You're making an awful racket," Bing informed him.

"If the three gangs want him dead, I say we give 'em what they want." Alice barged over to DeWalt, seized the front of his suit jacket, and nearly yanked him off the floor. "I say we toss 'em into our slipstream and be done with it."

"No!" DeWalt tried to wrestle out of her grasp, and rounded on Clifton again. "Help me! Get it off me! Don't you touch me, alien filth!"

"Shut up, DeWalt," Clifton snapped.

"I didn't do anything!" DeWalt wailed. "I'm innocent in all this! I only wanted to complete a simple business deal! What kind of hellhole *is* this place?"

"It's your fault we're on the run for our lives," Alice snarled. "We wouldn't be in danger at all, if not for you."

"You can't kill me! I can pay! I'm…I'm human!"

Alice grimaced, but Bing burst out laughing. "That should make you a nice, tasty lunch for the rest of us."

"Shut *up*, DeWalt," Clifton repeated. He turned to Eckhart. "What can we do? How do we come up with a plan?"

"You can't seriously think about helping *them*!" DeWalt fought to get as far away from Alice as possible, but the more he struggled, the more firmly she held him. She relished making him squirm at the end of her bony arm. "You work for me! You can't turn against me now!"

Clifton ignored him. "These criminal organizations you mentioned—do they inhabit any particular territory? Is there a way to avoid areas where they might be looking for us?"

"Don't you dare even talk to them!" DeWalt roared. "They're aliens! They're scum!"

“Scum who’ll blow your head off rather than look at you.” Alice pulled her sidearm and jammed the barrel into DeWalt’s neck.

Bing dropped his humorous attitude in a heartbeat. He moved around Alice and stood at DeWalt’s side, trailing one of his tentacle arms down DeWalt’s chin.

He finished by looping the tip around DeWalt’s arm and jerking it back hard. “Which part do you think the Immortals will want to sample first? Which part do you think will taste the juiciest?”

DeWalt screamed and, with a heroic effort, ripped himself out of their grip. He tripped over Rixby in his haste to run shrieking from the galley.

They both went down, and Rixby cried out in pain. The sound went through her crewmates like a gunshot. Eckhart tensed to intervene, but Alice and Bing reacted so fast he never saw them coming.

They pounced on DeWalt. Alice grabbed him by the hair and yanked him off Rixby. She hurled him back in the other direction, and he crashed into Bing coming up behind.

Bing caught DeWalt and wrapped sinuous limbs around him. One coiled around DeWalt’s neck, but the man was too panicked to stop fighting.

He jerked away and knocked into Alice. DeWalt’s hysterical energy dragged Bing with him, and all three toppled in a heap.

Alice’s sidearm flashed in the mix, but Eckhart worried more about Bing than any of the others. Bing knew his own strength, but lacked the scruples not to use it. He had no reason to go easy on DeWalt.

Eckhart and Clifton both stepped in to stop the fight. Dallas advanced from across the galley, but when Eckhart reached the struggling trio, he couldn’t untangle Alice and Bing from DeWalt’s writhing form.

DeWalt screamed louder than ever. He flailed in all directions, and landed several punches on his would-be attackers.

Alice roared and tried to bring her sidearm around to blow DeWalt’s head off, but Bing’s many limbs got in the way. She couldn’t get a clear shot. Eckhart tried one more time to unwind Bing’s limbs from DeWalt’s body, but DeWalt’s own efforts prevented it.

“Pick him up!” Eckhart yelled over the noise. “Hold him and pick him up!”

No one heard him. The three of them kept battling each other in a twisting, contorting mass of limbs.

Eckhart finally jammed his hand between Bing's face and DeWalt's chest. DeWalt gnashed his teeth, and even tried to bite Eckhart. Eckhart's instincts kicked in, and he punched DeWalt square in the nose.

The guy's head snapped back, and his eyes rolled for a second. In that moment, Eckhart grabbed Bing's head and turned his friend to face him. "Pick him up, Bing! Hold him and bring him with me!"

He'd finally gotten through to Bing, but Bing couldn't get off the floor, still grappling the struggling DeWalt in a death grip.

Dallas and Clifton came over, and between them and Eckhart, they pried Alice off and picked up both Bing and DeWalt. They hauled the pair of them out of the galley. DeWalt's shrieks echoed through the ship.

Bing restrained DeWalt all the way down the corridor to the nearest crew cabin. Eckhart opened the door, and Bing extended his limbs to hold DeWalt away from him.

DeWalt kept kicking and screaming. Eckhart dipped a nod to Dallas and Clifton. They stepped back, and Bing dropped DeWalt to the floor.

DeWalt landed on his side and sprang up in an instant. He hurtled for Bing, but Eckhart stopped him. He slammed his flat palm on DeWalt's chest and sent him wheeling into the compartment. At the same moment, Eckhart pulled Bing out of the cabin, shut the door, and locked it.

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13

Eckhart heaved a deep sigh. “Did you have to, Bing? Can’t you lay off the cannibal jokes?”

Bing giggled. “But it’s so funny.”

“At least he won’t put the rest of us in danger in there.” Eckhart turned to find the rest of the crew watching him. Clifton stood with them. He’d made no effort to stop Eckhart from locking up DeWalt. “Thanks.”

“What do you want to do with him?” Clifton asked. “Do you want to dump him?”

“Not yet.” Banging noises, foul curses, and blood-curdling shrieks came from inside the cabin. “If he’s worth anything at all, we should keep him—at least until we get all these gangs off our tail.”

“He isn’t lying, you know,” Clifton replied. “He really isn’t worth anything. I mean, he’s rich. But he truly is a desk jockey with more money than sense.”

“The gangs don’t think so,” Bing added.

“Tell me more about this job you had on Oskz,” Eckhart said. “What do you know about what he was doing on that planet?”

“You already know everything I know. It was a simple pick-up-and-payment exchange between DeWalt and the supplier.”

“It couldn’t be that simple,” Alice cut in. “It never is.”

“Who was the supplier?” Eckhart asked.

“I have no clue,” Clifton replied. “As far as I could tell, DeWalt didn’t even know. It was all anonymous. The supplier was going to steal the crystal from some vault. We were supposed to be on hand to pay him off the minute he came into town.”

“How convenient,” Bing sneered.

Clifton rounded on him. “It’s the truth. I’m not a liar.”

“He doesn’t mean that,” Eckhart replied. “He means it’s convenient that you and this mystery supplier just happened to be on Oskz at the exact same time and place that we were planning to break into the same vault to steal the same crystal.”

Clifton cast around to the rest of the crew. “What does that mean?”

“It means Vuldak sold us out—again,” Alice hissed.

“No one knew when we were assaulting the Jackal Clan’s compound,” Eckhart pointed out. “Not even Vuldak knew that.”

“It can’t be pure coincidence,” Dallas argued.

Eckhart shrugged. “Either someone hired a second team to take the crystal, or else…” He trailed off.

“What?” Clifton prompted. “What do you think happened?”

“This is all guesswork, but if this mystery supplier somehow found out about our plans, maybe he wanted to pinch the crystal from us and sell it as their own.”

“He wanted to wait until after we cracked the vault and took out the Jackal Clan for him,” Alice said.

“Damn all of this.” Eckhart threw up his hands and headed for the bridge. “It doesn’t matter. We’re getting rid of it.”

“What are you going to?” Clifton asked.

“We’re going to dump you—and the crystal.”

Clifton looked stunned. “You can’t—”

“I don’t mean dump you in space. I’m going to take you to the only place I know for certain you’ll be safe. The Immortals, the Chosen, and Silent Death won’t care about us once we get rid of you.”

Clifton blanched. “Where are you taking us?”

“We’ll drop you off at a Regiment station, but getting there will take a while. We’ll offload the crystal first.”

Eckhart stepped onto the bridge, and didn’t even mind when Clifton came with him. He sat down in his chair. “Can we send messages from here without attracting unwanted attention?”

“Long-range scans show the area is relatively free of other ships, even as far as the Imael Band,” Rixby reported. “Where do you want to send a message?”

“Drao,” Eckhart replied. “Can your scans penetrate that far?”

“If one of the enemy does pick us up,” Alice interjected, “we’ll have plenty of warning if they come near the asteroid belt.”

Eckhart tapped the coordinates into his regulators. Nothing happened. He waited, but still no one replied. “What’s going on? Is anyone home?”

“They’re there,” Rixby replied. “The message is reading as received.”

Eckhart frowned at his instruments. “That’s weird.” He sent the message a second time.

After another long wait, the image of a grey, hangdog alien appeared before him. He spoke in a low, breathless, dying kind of voice. “Can I do anything for you, Eckhart?”

“I hope so. You may have heard I have an Oksite crystal for sale.”

“I heard it was destined for Vuldak Dhaddet.”

“Vuldak declined to take delivery, so I’m looking for another buyer. Are you interested, Helvall? I know you trade in illicit explosives.”

“Hmmmm,” Helvall droned. “Oksite. It isn’t very sought-after.”

“A specimen as big as this one is. But if you aren’t interested, I’m sure one of my other buyers will be. Sorry to waste your time, Helvall. Have a nice day.”

Eckhart moved his hand over to the regulators and enjoyed the noticeable thrill of tension going through Helvall. The alien didn’t spring into action or raise his voice, because he couldn’t, but he definitely moved as fast as he possibly could.

“I would be interested, Eckhart. If it’s as big as you say…”

“You’d have to be more than interested,” Eckhart countered. “If you aren’t seriously buying, I won’t waste my time or yours. I can call up all kinds of people who would love to buy it.”

“What’s your price?”

Eckhart measured his audience with unerring accuracy. “Eighteen.”

Helvall shook his head slowly. His sagging eyes barely flickered away from the web, but that was as good as a gasp to Eckhart. “Eighteen is too high. I’ll give you fifteen.”

Fifteen was the original deal with Vuldak. Eckhart was certain that Helvall knew this, but it was time to add a pain-in-the-ass surcharge. “Eighteen,” he reiterated.

“Sixteen.”

“*Eighteen*.”

Helvall’s sagging eyes flickered again. “Seventeen.”

“Deal.” Eckhart never dreamed he would get a price as good as this, but he kept his voice steady. “We can be in orbit over Drao in twenty hours.”

“I would, however, be prepared to pay the full eighteen for the slug,” Helvall interrupted.

Eckhart’s head shot up. *Slug*. Vuldak had used the same term. He hadn’t thought anything of it at the time; humans were called a lot

worse on the fringes. “Which one?”

“There is only one. Eighteen and not a bit more. That’s my offer, Eckhart. I can’t go any higher without cutting into my profits.”

Eckhart took the space of a heartbeat to take in what Helvall was saying. If he was willing to pay that exorbitant price for DeWalt, Helvall stood to make a damn sight more than that on the other end. Who would buy DeWalt for that much?

DeWalt must be more than a useless desk jockey with more money than sense—a lot more.

Eckhart made a split-second decision. “The slug isn’t for sale. We’re trading for the crystal—nothing else.”

“Very well, Eckhart,” Helvall drawled. “I’ll see you in twenty hours.”

Alice turned around the minute Eckhart disconnected. She measured him with her sightless eyes. “Do you still plan to return them to the Regiment?”

“More than ever.”

After a moment, Alice nodded. “I’ll lay in a course for Drao.”

“No,” Eckhart countered. “We’re making another stop on our way to Drao.”

Both Alice and Rixby turned around to stare at him. “Where?”

“Kukuri.”

Rixby squeaked, and Alice made a gasping noise behind her mask. “That’s a thousand parsecs out of our way.”

“I know.”

Eckhart left the bridge, but he didn’t go back to working on the ship, much as he might like to. Being alone right now would only unsettle him even more. It would bring all these questions to the forefront of his mind. They would only impress on him how much he didn’t know.

Instead, he headed for the crew cabin where he’d left DeWalt. He had to pass the galley on the way there, and spotted Clifton in there talking to Dallas. They spoke in even tones, so maybe Eckhart’s comments had made an impression on Clifton after all.

Clifton looked up when Eckhart walked in.

“I need you to come with me. I want to talk to DeWalt, and he might take it better if you’re there.”

Clifton got to his feet immediately. “Sure. Let’s go.”

“Do you want me to come with you, too?” Dallas asked.

“Thanks, but I think we can handle it.” Eckhart didn’t tell Dallas

that getting talked to by two fully Earthling men would keep DeWalt calm better than getting talked to by two fully Earthling men and one giant mechanized killing machine.

The banging noises behind DeWalt's door had died, and Eckhart didn't hear sobbing in there, either. He unlocked the door, and he and Clifton stepped inside.

DeWalt hadn't even bothered to turn on the lights. The cabin lay in darkness. The stars whizzing past the window gave the only light.

Eckhart inched into the room. Clifton drew in a breath to call out, but Eckhart laid a hand on Clifton's arm to stop him.

He scanned the room, and spotted DeWalt curled up in a corner. He really was too woeful to take seriously.

Eckhart switched on the lights. The cabin flooded with light, and DeWalt winced in his corner. He screwed up his eyes and shrank from the brightness.

Eckhart stalked over to him, grabbed DeWalt's lapels, and hoisted the man to his feet. "Get up, DeWalt. Time to be a man and face your fate on your feet."

"Leave me alone!" DeWalt wailed. "Isn't it enough that you ruined my life? You even turned my bodyguard against me."

"You did that all by yourself," Eckhart told him. "I came to tell you that we're going to drop you off at a Regiment station. You'll be safe there, and the Regiment can arrange for you to make your way back to Earth."

DeWalt froze and blinked at him. "Really?"

"If you think you can manage to conduct yourself like a civil human being, I'll let you out of this cabin. That means no insulting any member of my crew, or trying to buy us off, or attacking anyone. Do you think you can do that?"

DeWalt swallowed hard. The wheels in his brain made a grinding noise while he thought it over. "How do I know this isn't a trick?"

"If I wanted to trick you into thinking I was going to take you to a Regiment station and slit your throat instead, you'd already be dead. Do I have your word that you'll behave yourself on my ship?"

DeWalt nodded, but he couldn't bring himself to speak, not even to thank Eckhart for freeing him.

Eckhart turned to the bodyguard. "I have to ask you to keep an eye on him and make sure he does it. If he acts up even once, I'll

lock him up again. Understand?"

"Of course," Clifton exclaimed. "Thank you. We really appreciate it."

Eckhart cast one more scathing glance toward DeWalt. The bastard didn't bother to thank him or to say that he appreciated anything, not even having his pathetic life saved from all the criminal elements hunting him.

Eckhart strode out of the cabin to find Dallas waiting for him in the corridor. Dallas stood in a classic guarding posture, no doubt preparing to break into the cabin and quell the intruders if need be.

Dallas fell in at Eckhart's side on their way back upstairs. "Are you sure you're doing the right thing?"

"If we don't offload him and the crystal in a hurry, all our lives will be forfeit. We won't be able to travel off this rock without someone shooting at us. It isn't worth keeping him around."

"You could just jettison them like Alice said," Dallas pointed out. "You're putting us all in danger by taking him to a Regiment station."

"Jettisoning him wouldn't tell the gangs that he's gone. They would think we still had him when we didn't, and we would be just as dead."

"That isn't the reason," Dallas countered. "You could have sold him already, and been quit of him just as easily."

Eckhart looked up at where Dallas' eyes would have been if he were still a mere man. "DeWalt is a defenseless puppy. If I wanted to go around killing defenseless puppies, I'd join the Regiment."

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14

“Pull up the façade data,” Eckhart told Alice.

“Take your pick. We have the Sani-O9, the Keisuke WF-075, or the Ierde HG-38.”

“Don’t listen to her!” Rixby squeaked from across the bridge. “We also have the Angkarn ZK-82, the Albion AF-860, and the Varun MFS-695. She doesn’t like those ships, so she didn’t mention them. She doesn’t want you to use them.”

Alice shot Rixby a hateful glare over her shoulder. “You’d have to be stupid to use the Varun. It’s a pile of shit.”

“Can we not get into an argument about it?” Eckhart interrupted. “Which façade would you like to use, Alice?”

“The Sani is the best.”

“We can’t use the Sani,” Rixby pointed out. “We don’t have any Datrium on board. It wouldn’t look right for a Sani to enter a Regiment station with no Datrium to defend itself.”

“The Keisuke, then,” Alice conceded.

“Fine. Do it.” Eckhart stood up. “Bring it online and pull in the long-range scan deflectors.”

Eckhart stuck his head into the galley, where Bing was balancing a ciri berry on his pointed snout. Dallas and Clifton laughed at his antics, but DeWalt stood still across the room, watching in turmoil. His face kept flickering back and forth between amusement and the revulsion he obviously still felt for this alien in front of him.

“Grab your berry and come with me,” Eckhart told them. “All of you, get up to the bridge.”

DeWalt jumped a foot off the ground. “Why? Are we under attack again?”

“No, we’re deploying our façade system. We’re disguising the ship as a Keisuke WF-075, so we need all life signs front and center on the bridge.”

DeWalt shot Clifton a questioning glance, but Clifton shook his head in confusion, too.

“The Keisuke is a small ship barely bigger than this room,” Bing explained. “If we tried to use the façade, the Regiment’s scans would pick up life signs out in space beyond where the ship should

be. We all need to be on the bridge to make it look convincing."

"Façade projections are Regiment technology," Clifton pointed out.

"That's why we have them," Dallas told him.

They returned to the bridge, and Eckhart pointed to the area behind his own chair. "You stand there."

He shot a significant look at Dallas and Bing, while Clifton and DeWalt shifted over where he told them. Dallas and Bing flanked the two men in a perfect position to intervene if either of the unwanted passengers acted up.

"The façade is in place," Alice told Eckhart.

He sat down in his seat and took the regulators. "Let's go. Nice and easy."

"We should have gone to Drao and restocked with Datrium first," Alice grumbled.

"Too late now."

Eckhart fired up the engines, but he didn't like going anywhere unarmed. He kept searching the tactical web for any enemy. If even one of the gangs hunting the *Marathon* recognized the ship, the whole crew was dead.

He eased out of the asteroid belt and fell into the course that Alice laid out for him. Rixby's scan data kept feeding into the tactical web, but with the long-range scan deflectors pulled in, Eckhart couldn't see beyond a few parsecs. He was flying blind.

He fought down the urge to speed up. He wasn't a fighter or even a garbage scow anymore. The Keisuke had no reason to swoop around and burn a bunch of fuel trying to outrun anybody.

"This is gonna take years," Alice muttered from her station. "We should have just flown there as the *Marathon*."

"We can't," Rixby began. "The Regiment—"

"Quiet," Eckhart ordered. "Pay attention."

A tense silence fell over the bridge, and Eckhart turned his attention to the station coming up on the web. "Forty-nine gunships in orbit around the station," Rixby reported. "They're closing for sentry crossing."

"Nice and easy," Eckhart murmured, more to himself than to anyone else. He eased the *Marathon* closer to the sentry crossing. Fifteen Regiment gunships swiveled into formation in front of the ship, and his stomach dropped. If they suspected, he wouldn't need to run away. He might as well just cut the engines and wait while

they blasted him to kingdom come.

The tactical web flickered, and a clean-cut man with a trim mustache appeared before Eckhart's eyes. If Eckhart hadn't been dealing with DeWalt and Clifton for the last few days, he would have been surprised to see another Earthling.

"Keisuke *Ithiotune*, Insignia XAE-0900, state your origin and destination."

Rixby displayed a bunch of counterfeit route data for Eckhart. "Origin Beostea N9M, destination Zinrone J9Z."

"State your business at Kukuri Station."

"Two passengers to disembark."

"Transmit passenger identity data."

Rixby transmitted DeWalt's and Clifton's data. The officer on the other end looked down to read it. Eckhart studied the man's expression for any sign that he recognized the two men, but he didn't.

That on its own sent up a red flag in Eckhart's mind. Any Regiment officer this far out on the fringes should have been mightily surprised for two fully Earthling men to turn up.

His total lack of reaction meant something. The guy really *did* recognize Clifton and DeWalt's names, but Eckhart couldn't discern if it meant anything else.

"Permission granted," the officer eventually replied. "Stand by to receive coordinates for landing."

"Thank you."

Eckhart kept his tone businesslike until he cut the message. "Why are they being so cagey?" Dallas asked behind his back.

"What do you mean by cagey?" Clifton asked.

"They know you," Dallas replied, "but they're pretending not to."

"Does it matter?" DeWalt asked. "We're landing here. We can get transport back to Earth with the Regiment."

Exactly. Eckhart let the matter rest. Clifton and DeWalt would be off the *Marathon* in a few minutes. What happened to them after that wasn't his business.

He set the ship down at the coordinates the Regiment had supplied. Eckhart's pulse skipped a beat when he landed between towering Regiment gunships. They dwarfed the *Marathon* by miles.

He stood up and waved to his crew. "All of you stay put. This won't take long."

He motioned Clifton and DeWalt to follow him, and he escorted them to the ramp. “There you go. Have a nice trip back to Earth.”

Clifton stuck out his hand to shake Eckhart’s. “Thank you for everything. If there’s any way we can repay you, please don’t hesitate to let us know.”

“That won’t be necessary. Just get back to the Sol system. You don’t belong out here.”

Clifton pulled out the two sidearms that Eckhart had given him. “You’d better keep these. We won’t need them.”

“Yeah. You should be safe now.”

“Thank you. We’re very grateful.”

Eckhart laughed. “You said that already. Just get in there—and don’t tell anybody who brought you here. Don’t mention the *Marathon* at all. Understand?”

“Yeah. Sure. Anything.”

Eckhart turned to DeWalt, but didn’t even try to shake the man’s hand. “Well, Mr. DeWalt, it’s been interesting. I hope maybe you’ll realize now that not all aliens are bad.”

DeWalt opened his mouth, but shut it again. His gaze darted toward the ship’s interior. He started to turn away, and stopped himself. “Thank you, Mr. Eckhart.”

“You’re welcome. Do yourself and everyone else a favor. Don’t ever leave the Sol system again.”

DeWalt nodded, started to turn away, and halted again. “Will you please thank your crew for me…for saving my life?”

“It would have been better if you thanked them yourself, but since you’re leaving, I’ll tell them you chose this moment to finally be a decent human.” Eckhart waved toward the station behind DeWalt. “Go on. Get in there. You’re holding us up.”

Clifton grabbed DeWalt’s arm and pulled him out of the ship. DeWalt looked back once, and then they took off for the station.

Eckhart went back inside before he saw them enter the nearest quadraplex. He shut the ramp and returned to the bridge.

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15

“Are they gone yet?” Bing asked.

“Yeah. They’re gone.”

“Good. My appetite might have gotten the better of me if they’d stuck around any longer.”

Dallas laughed, and Eckhart launched the ship. “Now we just have to drop off the crystal, pick up our Datrium, and we’re clear.”

“How long do we have to hang around on the bridge?” Dallas asked.

“We’ll keep the façade in place until we offload the crystal—just to be safe.”

Eckhart ignored Bing and Dallas chatting in the background. He kept a sharp eye out for any other ships—gang-related, Regiment, or otherwise.

Plenty of Regiment gunships crossed the *Marathon*’s path. They came and went in droves from the station, but they paid no attention to the *Marathon*, now that the ship had gotten clearance.

Even when the tactical web was clear, he didn’t relax.

It wasn’t until they finally set down on Drao outside Helvall’s headquarters that he at last entertained the thought that everything was going to work out.

A bunch of low hovels dotted a village cast in perpetual shadow. Mist and fog hung over the sloping rooves. Every building in the village looked like it was sinking into the bog.

“You can lift the façade,” Eckhart told Rixby. “The *Marathon* will be more welcome here than a Keisuke.”

“Finally!” Alice gasped.

“Now I can finally get something to eat.” Bing headed for the exit. “Having those two snacks around has made me hungry.”

He and Dallas both laughed, but Dallas didn’t leave when Bing headed for the galley. He and Alice shadowed Eckhart out of the bridge, down the stairs, and to the ramp at the ship’s rear.

Alice selected a heavy-duty plasma rifle from the ship’s weapons vault. “You won’t need that,” Eckhart told her. “We’re passing the crystal to Helvall and walking out with our money. Helvall is harmless. You know that.”

“I’m not worried about Helvall. It’s the rest of the bastards in his establishment who’ll shoot us in the backs as soon as we get paid.”

Dallas slotted his assault guns out of their compartments in his armor, inspecting the weapons with care. “How much Datrium do you have left?” Eckhart asked him.

“About half my fuel complement.” Dallas cocked his head to one side. “Rixby is sending me a message through my helmet. She says she’s requesting Helvall’s quartermaster to resupply the *Marathon*. The quartermaster is sending out Datrium stocks now.”

“Good. Let’s get this over with.”

Eckhart took a gas mask from a locker by the ramp and pulled it over his face. The dusty smell of compressed gas entered his nostrils as the mask started to function.

Alice’s mask and Dallas’ helmet both filtered the atmosphere for them. They didn’t have to worry about the planet’s toxic environment poisoning them when they stepped outside. A human would last about a minute in this soup before their lungs were damaged beyond repair.

Eckhart popped the ramp and took off running through the murk, with Alice on one side and Dallas on the other. The fog stung Eckhart’s skin, but the next instant, he burst into the nearest hovel and slammed the door behind them.

He pulled off his mask and surveyed the dim tavern. A fireplace roared on one side of the room, but it cast a bluish-green glow into the room instead of orange-gold, siphoning gas from outside in, where it burned instantly to dissipate the toxic vapors.

Low tables lined the room. Like the houses themselves, they all seemed to be in a state of perpetual decay. Even the aliens surrounding them slumped and slouched, as though only a massive effort kept them from crumbling into ruin.

The aliens in the room belonged to four different species. Most of the patrons were Vaatune, and they stuck together in one quarter of the room, cramming together in their corner and casting suspicious glares at the rest.

The Sone, by contrast, sprawled over more of their benches than they needed to. They were typical mercs for hire. Eckhart had been in gunfights with Sone that ended with drinks. The Sone fought as long as someone was paying and not a second more. But while they were on the clock, watch out. These ones were obviously in the employ of Helvall, and Eckhart remained wary. Where that was one

Sone there were usually many, many more.

The small group of them here talked too loudly. They deliberately magnified their voices just to annoy the Vaatune.

Four members of the third type, the Monope, migrated between the benches, serving the patrons with food and drink. Eckhart made sure not to look too closely at what the patrons were eating, and he averted his gaze when they did. He'd made that mistake in the past, and he took pains not to make it again.

He worked his way between the benches. The patrons only acknowledged his presence by occasionally giving him a nod of recognition. Nobody here liked Earthlings on principle, and a few might kill one on sight, but Eckhart knew almost half the patrons in the room, and that usually settled the other half. They didn't look sideways at Dallas or Alice, either.

Eckhart made his way to the very back corner of the tavern, where a single member of the fourth race sat alone. Eckhart gazed down at Helvall. The alien's drooping eye pouches and sagging cheeks quivered while Helvall counted Seron seeds on the tabletop in front of him.

Helvall raised his bleary eyes, and gave no expression of surprise or any other emotion when he noticed Eckhart standing in front of him. "Did you bring the crystal?"

Eckhart pulled it out of his pocket and held it up. "Do we have a deal?"

Helvall turned to one side and rummaged in a bag that lay next to him on the bench. He pulled out a stack of rectangular chips and laid them in a neat pile on the table, keeping them close to himself where Eckhart couldn't reach them.

"Seventeen. That was our deal."

Eckhart nodded. "That's right."

Helvall's gaze dipped to the crystal. He and Eckhart eyed each other while Eckhart held out the crystal and Helvall slid the pile of chips across the tabletop to Eckhart's side.

They both stopped when the chips reached the halfway mark. Eckhart laid the crystal next to the pile. He and Helvall moved their hands at the same time. Eckhart picked up the pile of chips, and Helvall picked up the crystal.

Eckhart shuffled the chips in his hands. They felt nice and heavy and comforting. "Thank you."

"Thank *you*," Helvall returned.

Eckhart selected one chip and put it back down. “This is for the Datrium and Celdian.”

Helvall nodded. “If you need anything else, let me know. Your money is always good here, Eckhart.”

“Thanks.” He jutted his chin at the crystal. “I won’t be sorry to see the last of that. I’m sure the Regiment will be happy to get it back. Maybe, if they succeed, none of us will have to fly around in spaceships anymore.”

Helvall inclined his head to one side. “Why won’t we have to fly spaceships anymore?”

“That crystal—the Regiment wants to use it to produce a new form of instantaneous transportation. If they succeed, it’ll make space travel obsolete.”

Helvall’s impassive features betrayed the slightest hint of interest. “The Regiment has no interest in replacing space travel. Oksite is an explosive—nothing else.”

“I know. I just heard—”

“I’m surprised you’re so ill-informed, Eckhart. It isn’t like you. The Regiment wants this crystal because, once triggered, it would produce a doomsday explosion capable of wiping out entire planets. That’s all it’s good for. I thought you would know that, Eckhart, considering the access you have to so much useful information.”

Eckhart froze. “What possible use could the Regiment have for an explosive as powerful as that?”

Helvall made a huffing noise through his flat nose. That was as close to an outburst as he ever came. “To wipe out the aliens, of course! Honestly, Eckhart, what other use could they have for it? They want the crystal for Trinity Code, an interplanetary research body. Trinity Code plans to develop a weapon for use on the fringes. They aren’t going to use that anywhere near Earth!”

“They don’t…” Eckhart’s voice failed him. “They don’t *need* to wipe out alien worlds. Aliens are no threat to the Regiment.”

Helvall actually chuckled. “Not yet, they aren’t. You have to remember that the Regiment protects Earth’s interests. That’s the Regiment’s only function. They’re worried the aliens will get ideas above their station. The Regiment and whoever funds them think at least some aliens will eventually mount an effort to take over Earth and steal its vast wealth. The Regiment wants a doomsday weapon to annihilate all the aliens when that happens—or at least as many as they can.”

“If you’re right…” Eckhart’s head spun. “If you’re right, the Regiment might not have any reason to keep a weapon like that in reserve. There would be nothing to stop them from deploying it against the alien races preemptively.”

“Now you’re thinking straight, Eckhart. In fact, they’d have *every* reason to use it preemptively. They could rid the galaxy of the meddlesome aliens and take the resources no one can get to because too many aliens are guarding them. The Sol system wouldn’t have to spend vast sums on a full standing Regiment anymore. They could spend that money on exploiting all the aliens’ resources without interference or pesky considerations like ownership and territorial rights.”

Helvall gave another knowing chuckle, tucked the crystal into his pouch, and went back to counting his Sedon seeds.

Eckhart glanced behind him to scout a path to the exit when Helvall spoke again. He murmured down at his seeds as though Eckhart was already gone.

“The slug is probably dead already, along with his disposable bodyguard. Trinity Code planned to kill both of them when they brought the Oksite back to Earth, but now that the slug returned without it, the Regiment will certainly liquidate him.”

Eckhart shuddered, and immediately turned it into a shrug. He brushed Helvall’s comments away. “I never thought much of him. He’s better off dead, and now that the Oksite is off my hands, I don’t care what they do with it.” He held up his chips. “Thanks again, Helvall.”

Helvall nodded without looking up from his seeds. Eckhart jerked his chin at Dallas and Alice. They returned to the exit door, where Eckhart put on his mask.

They bolted into the gloom and raced back to the *Marathon*.

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16

Eckhart ripped off his mask inside the cargo hold and slammed the ramp shut. “Tell Rixby to take the ship out of orbit,” he told Dallas. “You two come with me.”

“What’s the big emergency?” Alice asked. “We’re free of those ducks.”

Eckhart stuck his head into the corridor and yelled up the stairs. “Bing! Come down here.”

“I’m eating!” the voice replied.

“You’ll be eating Datrium if you don’t come now!” Eckhart fired back.

He listened only long enough to make sure he heard movement on the stairs. Then Eckhart returned to the weapons locker. “Load up everything we have. We’re going on a mission.”

Bing strolled into the cargo hold in time to hear him. “Did Helvall give you another job?”

“In a manner of speaking. We’re going to get Clifton and DeWalt.”

“You have *got* to be kidding me!” Alice rasped. “Not those two again.”

“You heard what Helvall said. The Regiment plans to use the crystal to build a doomsday weapon powerful enough to wipe out every alien race on the fringes. The conglomerate plans to kill both men as soon as they get their hands on the crystal. Clifton and DeWalt might already be dead.”

“I hope they are,” Alice replied. “What happens to them doesn’t concern us.”

“You don’t have to take part if you don’t want to, but I’m going back for them.”

Eckhart took down five rifles in rapid succession. He checked their Datrium supplies before draping them one after another over his shoulder.

“I took them to the Regiment station on Kukuri because I thought they’d be safe there. If I’d known I’d be handing them over to the people who planned to kill them, I never would have done it. Besides, I still don’t understand how DeWalt is involved in this.

That was all right before I knew what the Regiment might be planning. Now I need to be sure those two don't know more than they realize."

"If you go back to Kukuri, you'll put the whole ship in danger." Alice turned to the others. "Back me up. Help me talk some sense into him."

"I'm going with Eckhart," Dallas replied. "I don't care about those two bastards, but if the Regiment does develop that weapon and deploys it against the aliens on the fringes, we'd be responsible for that—or partially responsible. We would have to do something to stop it, and since we're the only ones who know about it, we should do it now while we still can."

"We aren't talking about the weapon!" Alice fired back. "We're talking about a couple of idiots who don't know their asses from their elbows. Saving them won't stop the Regiment from developing any weapon."

"Alice is right," Bing interjected. "If you really want to stop the Regiment from developing a weapon like that, we should be going after the crystal, not those two."

"Oh, I plan to go get the crystal," Eckhart replied. "We have to get it before Helvall passes it on to someone else."

There was a moment of silence among the group, before Bing asked, "Why in the Galaxy did you give him the crystal in the first place, then?"

Eckhart held up the chips he just got from Helvall. "These. I gave him the crystal for these."

"We were just on Drao," Alice countered. "You were in the same room with him. You could have blown his head off and taken the crystal then and there. You could have taken those chips and any others he had in his pouch."

Eckhart shook his head. "You saw who was in the tavern. We never would have made it out alive."

"And where do you think you're going to go after Helvall where he'll be less guarded?" Dallas asked.

"We'll deal with that later. The crystal isn't in danger of being killed at any moment. We're going after Clifton and DeWalt first."

Alice growled something profane behind her mask, but Eckhart had already made up his mind. What a fool he had been. Even after everything Helvall said, he still didn't understand all the puzzle pieces at play.

If DeWalt was worth so much more than the crystal, why was everyone trying to kill him? Did he know something even he didn't realize? Or was he a better liar than Eckart gave him credit for?

Whoever had brought in the gangs to shoot down the *Marathon* on Chanus had been willing to detonate the Oksite to kill DeWalt. Who would do that?

He shook those thoughts out of his head and returned to the bridge. The crew must think he'd really gone around the twist this time, because they left him alone. Alice didn't come to the bridge with him.

Rixby stood on her workstation. She didn't look up when he entered and took his seat. Her fingertips flew over the controls, and her antennae waved more intensely than usual. They hovered an inch above the tabletop. She must be immersed in reading again.

She spent every spare moment poring over every scrap of information she could get her hands on. She remembered every detail, and could recall it with unerring precision. She might not be much good in a fight, but she could call up a vast store of every idea, stratagem, and scenario that had been tried in all of galactic history.

He took the helm and turned the *Marathon* back to Kukuri. The route took hours, and he didn't hurry. He faced a much bigger challenge this time than just disguising the ship, landing on the planet, and dropping off a couple of passengers.

He rummaged through the façade data while he planned his approach. By the time he neared Kukuri's orbit, Rixby still hadn't spoken to him, and the others hadn't made any appearance.

He went downstairs and found Alice, Dallas, and Bing in the galley. Dallas had the nutritional aperture on his armor hooked up to a dispenser in the ship's hull, but the other two weren't eating.

Alice bent over a giant field pounder that took up almost half the galley. She adjusted the breech fitting while she sighted the crosshairs on the galley wall.

Bing sat at the table in front of a mountain of rifles. His many limbs went through a whirlwind of blurred movement, checking, cleaning, adjusting, and loading them.

All three turned around to look at Eckhart when he entered. He raised his eyebrows at the pounder. "What do you plan to do with that?"

"Pound—what else?" She made another minor adjustment to the

sight. “I plan to shove this so far up Helvall’s ass he’ll be tasting Datrium for the next ten years.”

“Helvall is a Nalzai,” Bing chimed in. “I don’t think the Nalzai have asses, per se. They excrete their wastes through their—”

She rounded on him and gave him such a look that he cut himself off in a hurry. “Were you saying something?”

Bing looked away. “Nope. Not me.”

“I need all of you to take your stuff down to the cargo hold,” Eckhart told them.

“What for?” Bing asked. “We’re working in here.”

“Go work down there. We’ll be deploying the façade in a few minutes, and I need you three down in the cargo hold.”

“Which façade are you using?” Alice asked.

“We’re using the Ierde HG-38.”

“What the hell for?” Alice demanded.

“Why can’t we use the Sani?” Bing asked. “They have more firepower.”

“We’re landing on a Regiment station. The Sani belongs to the Qiqan race. The Regiment won’t let an alien ship land on the station, and they sure won’t give us permission to go out and explore for Clifton and DeWalt. We have to use a ship that’s more likely to be manned by an Earthling…which is why you have to go down to the hold.”

The three of them stared at him in a way Eckhart didn’t like at all. For a second, he was absolutely certain they were about to attack him.

“You want us to pretend to be your…your…” Alice didn’t finish the sentence.

“Prisoners,” Dallas said. “It’s smart. He wants to pretend he’s keeping us locked up.”

Eckhart held up both hands. “I’m the only person on this damn ship who’s still sufficiently Earthling to get onto the station. I’m not saying I like it, but if they don’t see me treating you the right way, they won’t let me off the ship.”

“By treating us the ‘right’ way,” Alice snarled, “You mean treating us like prisoners.”

“Or slaves,” Bing added.

“Or cargo,” Dallas replied.

“You wouldn’t make much of a cargo with only one of each of you,” Eckhart pointed out, “and the three of you are far too ornery

to ever be slaves. Now pack up your shit and get into the hold. Be grateful I don't chain you up to make the performance more convincing."

Dallas and Bing both laughed. Alice didn't. Dallas unplugged from his aperture and snapped his arm plate shut. Bing scooped up his rifles and followed Dallas out of the galley.

Alice motioned toward the pounder. "What the hell am I supposed to do with this?"

"Just leave it here. I'm sure it's adjusted well enough, and it isn't as though any of us is going to push it around the station."

"This is a really terrible idea," she told him. "You know that, right?"

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17

Eckhart scoffed. “I don’t remember you ever having a problem with terrible ideas before. Are you saying you’d be happy for the Regiment to develop a doomsday weapon to use against the fringe aliens…or to keep the fringe aliens down by threatening to use it?”

Alice made a disgusted sound in her throat and turned away. “You won’t be able to stop them if you’re dead.”

“Hold it.” He pulled her back, but her expression didn’t soften. She glared at him so ferociously he yanked his hand away, but ferocious glares were nothing new for her. “Did you pick up anything strange about DeWalt?”

“Strange? You mean like he’s a gutless worm who shits his pants if an alien looks at him sideways? Yeah. I picked that up.”

“Besides that.”

Alice’s sightless eyes drilled Eckhart with particular intensity. He didn’t want to think about what she could pick up about *him* when she looked at him like that. “What are you getting at?”

“Was there anything about him…anything…more than Earthling?”

“More than! Earthlings are the most pathetic, useless, weakest __”

“I got that. I’m asking if there was anything else.”

“Of course there wasn’t anything else. At least Clifton knows how to use a weapon. DeWalt is a nothing.”

“I know that, but… So many people are after him. They want to kill him. They would gladly blow up the *Marathon and* the crystal to get rid of him.”

She hesitated. “Maybe it’s something more than I could see on the surface, or under it.”

“What do you mean?” Eckhart asked.

“I mean maybe it was something I couldn’t see. Maybe it was something no one could see.”

“What would that be?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it was something implanted in his mind, or in some part of his body. Maybe…” Alice shook her head. “Never mind. It’s nothing.”

“Seriously,” he insisted. “What do you think? I want to know.”

“I’m saying maybe they don’t care about the Oksite. Maybe *he’s* the weapon.”

“If he’s the weapon, why would they want to kill him? The Regiment wanted to develop a weapon they could use against aliens. An Earthling wouldn’t be much good for that.”

“That’s what Helvall said. Helvall told you the Regiment wanted to develop a weapon they could use against aliens, but maybe this Trinity Code group only put that out on the grapevine. Maybe their real intentions are something different.”

Eckhart ran his fingers through his hair. He couldn’t think what intentions the Trinity Code might have to explain their actions, but Alice was right. He really didn’t know what was going on. He’d just trusted that Helvall was right about the Regiment wanting to kill Clifton and DeWalt.

“Do you still plan to go get them?” she asked.

Eckhart snapped alert. “More than ever. Get into the hold with the other two. If you still want to work on your pounder, you’d better take it with you. You won’t be able to leave the hold once I deploy the façade.”

She approached the pounder, planted her spindly arms against its giant metal bulk, and started pushing it toward the door. It was too big to fit through the opening, and Eckhart didn’t want to stick around long enough for her to ask him to help her.

He returned to the bridge and relayed the order to Rixby. She didn’t argue. She hopped off the workstation and headed for the corridor.

“Rixby?” Eckhart called after her.

“Yes?”

“Did you go over the ship’s internal scans while those two were on board?”

“Of course,” she chirped. “I always go over the scan data.”

“Did you pick up anything strange about either of them—anything out of the ordinary for Earthlings, I mean?”

She inclined her head to one side, and her antennae stretched toward him. “I did, actually. The shorter one—DeWalt—his body temperature was elevated.”

“Elevated how? Do you mean he had a fever or something? Was that why he panicked the way he did?”

“His internal body temperature was ten degrees above the

normal range for an Earthling."

Eckhart stared at her. "*Ten* degrees? Rixby, that's a lot."

"Is it?" she asked thoughtfully. "Yes, I suppose it is, now that you mention it."

"He should have been in a coma with a temperature that high."

"I suppose he wouldn't have been walking around, talking to us, and trying to bribe you into going back to Earth where you belong, would he?"

Eckhart couldn't enjoy the joke. "How do you explain something like that?"

Rixby waggled a bit, an expression that Eckhart had come to know as more or less a shrug. "I can't, other than to say that humans are strange. There are three alien races on the fringes whose normal body temperature range is as high as that, but I checked DeWalt's physiological readings. Everything else about him was normal for an Earthling."

"Are you saying he had normal Earthling DNA? He wasn't hybridized with anything else?"

"He's Earthling through and through, but we already knew that. He had all the right organs in all the right places for your species, and none of his other bodily functions were outside the normal range. There's no scientific explanation for it. I'm sorry, Eckhart, but it's a mystery."

"You can say that again."

She tilted her head the other way and waved her antennae at him. "Is there anything else you need from me, Eckhart?"

"Yeah, actually. I want you to set up a station for yourself in the hold. I want you to monitor the situation on Kukuri and, if anything goes wrong, I want you to take over and fly the ship to safety. Understand?"

"Of course." She turned and waddled away. "Good luck, Eckhart."

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PART 3

ONCE MORE, WITH FEELING

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18

Eckhart stepped into the cargo hold. His four friends looked up, saw him dressed in a Regiment major's uniform, and Dallas and Bing burst into gales of laughter. Rixby made a rapid chirping noise that told Eckhart she was laughing at him, too. Alice looked away in disgust.

"Enjoy yourselves while it lasts." Eckhart strode over to Bing's pile of rifles and picked one of them up. He examined the weapon and put it back.

"Take it," Bing urged. "You're gonna need it."

"They aren't Regiment-issue. It would only give me away."

Dallas took another look at Eckhart and exploded all over again. "Wait! Wait! I want to record this in my cerebral archive. I want to be able to pull this up when I need to cheer myself up after a bad day."

"Ha ha," Eckhart snarled. "You stay here and cheer yourself up while I do the dirty work. Are you ready, Rixby?"

"Ready," she replied.

"Take it easy, hotshot," Dallas told him. "I'd be going with you if I could."

"Well, you can't, so stay out of the way. If anyone sees you, the game is up."

Eckhart went over to the improvised workstation Rixby had set up in the cargo hold. "Hail the station."

The same channel flicked on, but this time, a female officer answered. "Ierde HG-38, Insignia 743-GISQ, state your origin and destination."

Eckhart read out the route data from the screen that Rixby displayed for him. "Origin Viborix 5QA, destination Catov 87Z."

"State your business at Kukuri Station."

Eckhart grabbed Bing by the back of the neck. He gave his friend a vicious yank and hauled him over in front of the screen.

Bing shrieked in surprise and indignation. He let out a string of Yakit curses, and his limbs flailed in front of the screen while he tried to free himself from Eckhart's grip.

"Dropping off three alien felons for incarceration and

sentencing!" Eckhart yelled over the noise. "Gotta get these delinquents off my ship, fast!"

The female officer checked her own readings of the *Marathon*. Eckhart watched her gaze flicker from one set of readouts to the next. She could identify Bing, Alice, and Rixby easily enough. She just couldn't see what they were doing.

What she might think about Dallas was anybody's guess. He no longer possessed enough Earthling DNA to read as human on any system, especially not the Regiment's.

Sure enough, the female officer frowned at the last set of readings. "You appear to have an AI on board, Major. Can you state the original manufacturer? Some AIs are banned in Earth's jurisdiction. If your AI is one of these, we'll have no choice but to confiscate and destroy it."

Eckhart kept his voice steady. He anticipated something like this. "I understand, Captain. The AI was manufactured by Platanistoidea Havilm."

The officer turned to a set of instruments off screen. She visibly relaxed when she read the results. "That's all in order, Major. Permission granted to land. A dispatch of security guards will stand ready to take your prisoners into custody."

"Thank you, Captain."

"Stand by to receive coordinates for landing."

Rixby cut the connection, and Eckhart turned to find his crew all staring at him. "How are you going to stop them from taking us into custody?" Alice demanded.

"Simple. I'll tell them that you're in a hibernation cycle and that you need to be moved at a certain time of the day. They'll be more than happy to leave you here until then." Eckhart entered the information into the station's system and went to the ramp. "Stay put and keep quiet. I'll try to find Clifton and DeWalt."

"That will be nearly impossible," Bing pointed out. "You'd be looking for weeks for two Earthlings on a station crawling with Earthlings. They could anywhere."

"They're in a restricted cell in the secure biocontainment block," Rixby announced. "They're in Cell 48C."

"Thanks, darling." Eckhart waved his friends aside. "All of you stand over there while I leave. Don't let them see you walking around free—except you, Dallas."

Alice, Bing, and Rixby crossed the hold, and Eckhart opened the

ramp. Regiment security guards patrolled the station in droves. They went from one ship to the next on a wide landing zone packed with spacecraft from all over the galaxy.

"You better be careful," Dallas murmured in his ear. "The Regiment has a unique form of slang for all the parts of the station and the ranks and positions of everyone who works here. If you make even one mistake, they'll make you. And then I'd bet you'll get shot on the spot."

"Don't worry about me," Eckhart replied. "I won't get shot."

"You'll attract more attention if you don't speak at all. How do you plan to handle it if someone asks you which Patroon Regent you belong to?"

"Then I'll tell them I belong to Destiny 2FV."

Dallas spun around so fast the mechanical joints of his neck popped. "All this time!" he whispered. "You never told us! You never told *me*!"

Eckhart brushed that off and jerked his thumb at the rest of the crew. "Keep an eye on them. Don't let them do anything stupid like coming after me."

"You were in the Regiment!" Dallas hissed. "You were one of *them*! Why didn't you tell me—*me*, of all people?"

Eckhart winced. This wasn't the time to go over the distant past. "That was more than twenty years ago." Eckhart forced a laugh. "I'm a criminal these days. The Regiment would be even more enthusiastic about killing me than the rest of you."

Eckhart tried to turn away, but Dallas pulled him back. "What happened?" The iron grip on Eckhart's arm told him Dallas wouldn't let him go until he told everything. "You told me you grew up on Parilia. You said you grew up starving in the slums. Was it all a lie?"

"Of course not. I *did* grow up on Parilia. I escaped from the slums by performing a hit for Aistenz Trotaer." Eckhart grimaced. "Are you happy now? I admit it. I earned my first income from a hit."

Dallas shook his head. "I knew you had history with Aistenz, but —"

"We all do," Eckhart said. "You do. Alice sure does."

Dallas shrugged. "I didn't think it was anything like that."

"Well, it was like that."

"Who was the hit?"

Eckhart hesitated. He didn't want to delay going out onto the station to search for Clifton and DeWalt, but that merciless bite in Dallas' tone left no room to negotiate. Dallas could stop Eckhart from leaving if he wanted to. Dallas wouldn't *let* him leave until he got some answers.

"Zels Ariat."

Dallas gasped again. "*You* were the one who killed Ariat?"

"Keep your voice down," Eckhart murmured. "Don't let the others hear you."

"That hit is legendary!" Dallas whispered back. "We all thought it was one of the Lion Tribe that did it, it was so…so *brutal*."

"Yeah, well." Eckhart scanned the station beyond the ramp. "I planned it that way. I made it look like the Lion Tribe did it so no one would suspect it was just a starving teenager from the slums. As soon as I got the money, I jumped Parilia and I never went back."

"So how did it happen? How did you get into the Regiment and…damn, Eckhart! How did you end up *here*?"

Eckhart tried to chuckle, and wound up wincing. He didn't want to talk about it. He'd known Dallas for years, and the rest of his crew even longer. He'd kept his past quiet all this time—this part of it, at least.

"I saw a lot of nasty shit on Parilia. I made myself two promises. First, that I'd get the hell off the planet as soon as possible. Second, I promised myself I would never hurt civilians, bystanders, the defenseless, or the innocent. I promised myself I would help them whenever I could, and that I'd make my living hunting anyone who wanted to hurt them. Fortunately, there was plenty of work doing that, so I never went without."

"What does that have to do with the Regiment?"

"I didn't know then what the Regiment was all about. I believed the fairy tales about the Regiment being responsible for upholding the law and protecting the defenseless, so I joined up."

Dallas snorted. "That was stupid."

"I was young, and I had never been off Parilia. Besides, between the Regiment and going to work for Aistenz's crew, I think I made the right call. I figured the Regiment would let me turn my skills to something nobler than being a criminal. I found out real fast what the Regiment's real agenda was. Our team was deployed against civilians who resisted being relocated from their home planet to make room for a new Regiment installation. I finished the tour and

got discharged. I came back out to the fringes where I belonged, and no one ever found out."

"Holy shit!" Dallas breathed again. "You should have told me."

"No. I shouldn't have." Eckhart shot a quick glance over his shoulder. "Don't tell anyone."

"Okay, man. I won't." Dallas released his grip.

"I gotta go. Hold the fort."

He clapped his hand on Dallas' shoulder. For the first time since he'd met Dallas, Eckhart wished he could touch some human part of this man—some part of flesh and bone, but those were two things Dallas no longer had.

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19

Eckhart stepped off the ramp, and Dallas shut it behind him. Eckhart didn't have time to look back before four security guards approached him, reading off a handheld device.

"Major Osbourne?"

"That's right, Sergeant." Eckhart held out his hand.

The security guard swiveled his device toward Eckhart, and Eckhart pressed his right thumbprint to the screen. Every movement brought back memories he'd rather not think about.

The screen beeped, and the sergeant read the fake identification record Rixby had created for Eckhart. The sergeant nodded. "Thank you, sir. Everything's in order. You'll just need to register with the harbormaster about divesting your cargo."

"Thank you, Sergeant." Eckhart pushed past the guards, and they left to inspect a different ship.

Eckhart crossed the landing zone, but he didn't go see the harbormaster about divesting anything. He made sure he passed far enough out of sight of the original guard squad; then he turned aside and set off through the station.

Numerous Regiment soldiers and officers passed him. They dropped occasional code words and slang in his ears, and he found himself replying automatically. Truckloads of information he thought he'd forgotten came rushing back.

He made his way down long corridors, along causeways between buildings, and through enormous turrets with guns the size of small ships pointed out into space.

He spotted the secure biocontainment block long before he got near it. It lay low across the station's rear perimeter, with an even bigger landing zone beyond it. A monstrous prisoner transport crouched on the zone, but no people worked near or on it. It squatted there like something alive and unspeakably evil.

He didn't know what the Regiment planned to do with Clifton and DeWalt, but Eckhart couldn't let them get on that ship. Eckhart couldn't have that on his conscience—not for anything.

His hands itched for some kind of weapon, but the wrong weapon here would be worse than no weapon at all. He didn't have

any Regiment-issue weapons on the *Marathon*, so he would have to improvise.

Armed guards paced back and forth in front of the building. Eckhart could sneak up on one of them, knock out the guard, and steal his weapon. That wouldn't help him get into the building, though, and it sure as hell wouldn't help him once the Regiment sent reinforcements to capture the intruder.

He squared his shoulders, tugged his uniform jacket into place, and set off for the biocontainment block at a smart clip. He'd never been a major in the Regiment, but he could act the part.

The two guards on either side converged to meet him at the security checkpoint. They snapped to alert when they saw his supposed rank. "Sir!" one said. "This department is a secure area. I have to ask you to submit to—"

"Not a problem, Corporal." Eckhart stuck his hand between the guards and pressed his thumb to the screen on the wall. It beeped, and the doors unlocked.

"Thank you, sir!" Both guards moved aside and snapped to alert. "Now if you'll just pass through the DNA screen..."

The DNA readers lit up and glowed blue when Eckhart passed through. A chime pinged to let the guards know he was fully Earthling, without any alien DNA contaminating his cells.

Eckhart entered the containment block, and the doors clicked shut behind him. Now he was in, and hardly any safer than he'd been outside. He headed down a long corridor stretching the length of the building. Side passages left the main hall, going deeper into the structure.

Cells lined the walls, and at least half of them had more guards standing outside them. This was going to be a lot harder than he'd thought.

He tried to make himself inconspicuous while he checked the cell numbers, but none of the guards paid any attention to him. Each cell door was constructed of a solid sheet of Kesmite plate. A single tiny window allowed someone to peer inside, and an electronic speaker allowed those outside to speak to the prisoners.

Cell 48C was in one of the side hallways. Four guards stood in front of the door, and they were all armed. Eckhart strolled past their location while he thought fast about how to get near Clifton and DeWalt.

He stopped at an unmanned cell and pretended to look inside.

His insides squirmed when he spotted fourteen female and juvenile Ognin crowded on the floor.

The women cradled little children on their laps, while older children leaned against their shoulders for comfort. Galaxy only knew what the Regiment was doing with them, or where they planned to send these people once they left Kukuri.

He had to stop the Oksite crystal from falling into Regiment hands; but first, he had to get Clifton and DeWalt out of here. They were here because of him. He had to correct that.

Eckhart turned back down the hall and spotted another squad of security guards heading his way. Every dozen yards or so, ones and twos split off to relieve the guards already on duty. They must be changing shift.

Eckhart made a split-second decision, and turned toward Clifton and DeWalt's cell. He walked right up to the guards, and all four snapped to attention. "Good evening, sir," one said.

"Good evening, Corporal," Eckhart replied. "I'm here to see the prisoners."

"Sir?" The middle two guards exchanged glances. "We didn't receive any orders…"

"That's because there weren't any orders. I represent the conglomerate that wants to get these two back to Earth. I need to speak to them." Eckhart cocked his head at one of the guards. "Do you need to confirm this with your sergeant before you let me in?"

The guard's eyes flashed to the insignia on Eckhart's collar. "No, sir. One of us should accompany you. These prisoners are dangerous."

Eckhart made a face. "I doubt that. Besides, what I have to discuss with them is classified." He measured his audience. "Give me your weapon, Corporal."

The soldiers all jolted in alarm. They glanced at each other again. "Sir…I can't do that."

Eckhart jerked his thumb behind him. "You'll be off duty in five minutes. Your relief is coming down the hall now. If anything goes wrong, you'll be long gone. Give me your weapon."

The corporal hesitated again, and then shoved the gun into Eckhart's hands. Eckhart pretended to check it. "Thank you, Corporal. Open the door."

This time, the guy balked so badly that he actually backed away without following the order. He gaped at Eckhart in abject dread.

He shook his head fast, but he didn't make any move to open the cell.

One of the others finally entered a code and pulled the door open. The remaining two guards held Eckhart at gunpoint while he stepped into the cell.

They were scared. Of what? Of DeWalt and Clifton? That almost seemed funny. Clifton knew how to handle a weapon and that was about it. Which was more than he could say of DeWalt.

Even so, the guards kept their guns aimed first at his head, then at his back, until the lock clicked behind him.

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20

Clifton looked up. His gaze met Eckhart's, and Clifton looked away without recognizing him. All at once, Clifton shot off his seat and lunged across the cell. "Eckhart! How did you get in here?"

"Shhh!" Eckhart whispered. "We don't have much time. I'm here to get you out."

"How?" Clifton asked. "The captain in charge of our case sent a message to Earth to find out what the Trinity Code wants them to do with us. He said the message could take weeks to get there."

Eckhart scoffed. "A standard channel, maybe. But a priority message will take far less time, and I'm sure nothing about you is going out on standard channels. We aren't going to stick around that long to find out."

"We aren't?" DeWalt asked. He looked at Clifton. "You said the fringes weren't safe for us."

Eckhart took a second before he realized that DeWalt still didn't grasp the danger he was in. "You're in a cell, Mr. DeWalt. You're in a biocontainment quarantine block even though there's nothing wrong with either of you. The guards out there are ready to shoot first and ask questions later. Do you not wonder why you're in here and not on a luxury liner heading back to Earth? The Regiment sent a message to Earth to find out what the Trinity Code wants to do with you. I'd be willing to bet everything I own, and even the lives of my crew, that it isn't good news."

"What can we do about it?" Clifton asked. "*Can* you get us out of here?"

"The guard is changing any second now." Eckhart stole a peek through the window. "As soon as they leave, we'll attack and get out of here."

"Why not now?" DeWalt asked. "Won't they be distracted by the change?"

Eckhart had to restrain himself not to sneer at the man. "There will be twice as many of them. The regular guard is only four men, and there are three of us…" He shot a glance at DeWalt. "Barely."

"We only have one weapon," DeWalt pointed out.

Eckhart almost told him that he wouldn't give DeWalt a weapon

if he had the whole Regiment armory at his disposal, but Clifton interrupted before Eckhart had a chance to say that. “Don’t worry about me. I’ll handle it.”

Eckhart didn’t doubt him. He spotted the guards peeking at him through the window. No doubt they were wondering what he was talking to the prisoners about. The next second, the guards resumed their positions, and Eckhart couldn’t see them anymore.

“Let’s go,” Eckhart murmured to Clifton. “They’ll hold us at gunpoint until I get out into the hall. Stay where you are until I make the first move. Then, get a weapon away from them as soon as you can. We’ll have to strike fast—and try to be quiet. This building is crawling with soldiers. The more noise we make, the quicker they’ll come after us.”

“What do you want me to do?” DeWalt asked.

Eckhart scanned him up and down. “Don’t get killed, or this whole trip will be a waste of time.”

“Shouldn’t we hide?” DeWalt pointed to either side of the door. “Should we ambush them?”

“Not unless you want them to realize that we’re about to attack.” Eckhart knocked on the door, and one of the soldiers came over.

The man activated the microphone. “Yes, sir?”

“I’m ready to leave.”

The four guards outside spun around, and shouldered their rifles to cover Eckhart. “Raise your weapon above your head.”

He held up the gun and stepped out into the hall. The soldiers started to swing the door shut, but Clifton didn’t wait until Eckhart made his move. He must have seen the door closing and reacted instinctively.

He charged the door and smashed it open. A gun went off, but Clifton dodged it. He plowed into the man who shot at him and nailed his shoulder into his attacker’s ribs. So much for keeping quiet.

The noise set Eckhart off. He brought his weapon down hard in a cracking blow on another guard’s head. The man folded at Eckhart’s feet. The last two remaining guards turned, one toward Eckhart and one toward Clifton.

Eckhart lunged for his attacker and seized the man’s rifle. He yanked it sideways and jammed his gun barrel under the man’s jaw. He didn’t think. He just did what he had to.

The guy's skull dissolved in a cloud of blood and disintegrated bone. The shot echoed through the building, and Eckhart heard shouts and running footsteps in the distance. More guards down the corridor turned and raised their weapons to aim at the fugitives.

Clifton grappled his adversary against the wall while they both struggled for control of the soldier's rifle. Clifton stiffened his hand and stabbed his fingertips hard into the soft notch where his enemy's neck met his chest, aiming the blow downward inside the guy's body armor, and his adversary crumbled.

The fourth guard took aim at Clifton's back. Clifton ripped the gun out of his fallen victim's grasp, but he couldn't turn around fast enough to defend himself. But before the guard could squeeze the trigger, DeWalt pounced on him from behind.

The banker slung one arm around the soldier's neck and gouged his fingers into the guard's eyes. The guard still managed to fire, but DeWalt succeeded in wrenching the man sideways so the shot missed killing Clifton.

Clifton whipped around to see his boss flapping from his enemy's neck. The soldier flailed to get DeWalt off, but the banker stuck like anything.

His actions surprised Eckhart so much that neither he nor Clifton reacted right away. They stared at DeWalt and his enemy, turning one way and then the other. They might have stood there in stunned amazement for more precious seconds if a deafening biocontamination alarm didn't shriek from overhead.

Eckhart looked up to see a squad of soldiers closing in. Gunshots ricocheted down the hall from a hundred yards away.

Eckhart shouldered his rifle and returned fire. He couldn't stand around. He rushed DeWalt and smashed his rifle butt into the soldier's face. The guy dropped with DeWalt still clinging to him.

Eckhart and Clifton scrambled to gather up as many guns as they could lay their hands on. DeWalt knelt next to the fallen soldier, staring at the man's inert body.

"Get moving, DeWalt!" Eckhart yanked him to his feet by his elbow. "Come on!"

DeWalt staggered after him, but everywhere they turned, more soldiers gathered from all over the building.

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21

“How do we get out of here?” Clifton yelled over the noise of more shots coming from all sides.

Eckhart pointed toward a posse of at least thirty soldiers advancing from the main corridor. “The exit is over there, but we can’t go that way.”

“I meant besides that.”

The trio came to another turn, and Eckhart peeked around it. “The other exits are all blocked. The building is in lockdown. We’ll have to go up.”

“Up!” DeWalt cried. “How do we go up?”

“There.” Eckhart pointed up at a huge reinforced window covering most of the roof. The transport vessel Eckhart had just seen outside passed beyond it.

DeWalt nodded to himself. “Oh, sure. We’ll get up there and the *Marathon* will fly over and pick us up.”

Not exactly.” Another smattering of gunfire smashed into the wall behind Eckhart’s head, and he pushed the others away. “Go! Run!”

“Where?” Clifton called back. “How do we get up there?”

Eckhart didn’t answer. He couldn’t, with so many soldiers shooting from all sides. They charged after the men no matter where Eckhart steered them.

He stumbled around another corner and almost ran headfirst into another group closing them in. There was no way out.

Clifton skidded backward and bowled DeWalt into Eckhart. The three men backed against the nearest wall. Clifton and Eckhart fired outward, but they couldn’t drive the soldiers off.

Eckhart glanced behind him to say something to Clifton. The moment he turned his head, his eye caught something moving behind the window of the nearest cell.

He lunged for Clifton and grabbed the man’s weapon. “Give me your rifle!”

“Huh? No way!” Clifton tried to fight him, but Eckhart didn’t quit.

“Look! Shoot the door out! Hurry.”

Clifton hesitated, and Eckhart ripped the weapon out of his hands. He turned both rifles on the door behind him.

He emptied both guns into the lock, and the door finally popped open. Eckhart dove inside and almost got trampled by a huge Regor. The thing had been lumbering around the cell, smashing its armored head into the reinforced walls.

The creature took one look at Eckhart, let out a ground-shaking bellow, lowered its head, and plunged. Eckhart didn't have time to get out of the way, so he sprang forward with all his might.

He stretched for the tiny opening between the creature's legs. Eckhart skidded on his stomach, and the Regor launched over his head. It collided with the rear wall, and the door frame buckled before its rage.

DeWalt screamed out in the hall as the Regor wound back and attacked again. This time, it plowed straight through the wall and vanished into the corridor. Its massive footsteps shook the ground.

Eckhart scrambled to his feet and peeked outside. Clifton and DeWalt cowered against the wall, watching the creature thunder up and down the corridor. It scored the Kesmite walls with its horns, ripped doors off more cells, and gored any soldiers who tried to stand their ground.

Eckhart tiptoed through the rubble and grabbed Clifton. "Come on. Now's our chance to get out."

"How do we get up to the roof?"

Eckhart assessed the situation, but he didn't see any way out, either. This building must be the most secure on the whole station.

He took DeWalt's sleeve to lead the two men away. "Let's get away from this thing. Maybe we'll find something on the other side of the—"

Ka-boom! A bone-crunching concussion blasted down the corridor, and all three men leapt for the wall to take shelter. The Regor gave a withering bellow and stamped its massive hoof on the floor.

A group of Regiment soldiers wheeled a pounder into position down the hall and fired at the Regor. The rocket glanced off the creature's armor, smashed into the opposite wall, and deflected into another cell.

The Regor tossed its head, and its horns struck the window overhead. Reinforced Ioscesten shattered and rained into the corridor, but no one noticed. The creature lowered its treacherous

head one more time and shot away in a death charge for the pounder.

The gunners scrambled to get their weapon reloaded in time. They adjusted their aim with the Regor bearing down on them. Eckhart ducked and covered his arms for the inevitable collision.

The gun went off. The rocket hit the creature square in the sternum and bounced off without even scratching it. The projectile ricocheted into the floor and shot out behind the creature, skidding once on the floor and tilting upward. It struck the wall at the far end of the corridor as the Regor barreled into the pounder.

A boulder of concrete pinwheeled out of the explosion and clipped Eckhart across the back. It smacked him to the floor, and he huddled for cover. Dozens of blows hammered him all over.

Someone grabbed his arm and tried to haul him out of the debris, but he couldn't move. Something heavy pinned him down.

"Eckhart!" Clifton yelled in his ear over deafening noise.

Clifton tried to tug at him again, but it was no good. Dust and smoke choked Eckhart's nose and mouth. He coughed, and his eyes watered. He struggled to see the carnage through the chaos.

Voices called from everywhere at once. Eckhart floundered against the urge to pass out, and took a second to believe what he was seeing.

The Regor planted itself a dozen yards away and stooped over the big pounder. The creature hooked the giant gun on the point of one horn and tossed the weapon into the air. The gunners screamed as the pounder landed upside down, with several of them pinned beneath it.

The Regor butted the gun down into the floor. The metal folded beneath its iron skull and the gun crumpled. The Regor roared to shake the building, but that didn't concern Eckhart.

A strong wind blew into the building, and the dust dissipated to reveal a wide hole blasted in the side of the building. Eckhart stared through it at the station spread out beyond.

Armored vehicles and mounted cannons trundled toward the biocontainment block, but they didn't come near the breach. They all headed toward the main entrance. None of them seemed to know the building had been breached.

Eckhart tried to stand up, but an impossible force pinned his left leg to the ground. He examined it, trying to understand. Clifton and DeWalt worked over him grappling a giant steel beam. They

strained and sweated to lift it off Eckhart's legs.

Lights swiveled across the opening right in front of them. If Eckhart could only get free, they could make a break for freedom through that hole, but he couldn't help Clifton and DeWalt.

The Regor gave another tremendous bellow and wheeled away from the destroyed pounder. It moved into Eckhart's line of sight, narrowing its eyes at Clifton and lowering its head.

"Look out!" Eckhart roared.

Clifton glanced over his shoulder in time to see the Regor launch itself at him and DeWalt. Clifton tackled DeWalt out of the way. Eckhart shielded his head, and splitting pain tore up his body as the thing barreled its dense skull into the pile of debris holding him in place.

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22

Eckhart came to as he lurched down the corridor. Mind-destroying pain tore through him. He could barely think straight, but he seemed to be moving through space.

The next instant, a waft of cooling air touched his sweat-caked face. He was outside in the artificial air containment field and moving in a running stagger across the landing zone. He concentrated with a heroic effort, and realized that Clifton and DeWalt were carrying him between them. Eckhart's ruined legs dragged on the pavement. He tried move them and sent a fresh bolt of pain down his spine.

Well, the good news was he wasn't paralyzed. The bad news was, he was very close to it. Moving his legs was going to be a painful ordeal. At least if he could get back to the *Marathon*, he knew Bing could heal him.

But that seemed like a bit *if* right now.

Ear-splitting sirens shrieked all over the station. Armored vehicles screeched nearer from all sides. Gunfire pelted across the tarmac. It came in such thick gusts that Eckhart couldn't figure out who was shooting and who wasn't. Maybe everyone was shooting.

His head lolled when he tried to turn toward Clifton. "Give me a weapon!"

Clifton ignored him and kept running. Eckhart struggled to understand why. When his vision cleared slightly, he put the pieces together. He already had a weapon. In fact, he had at least three that he could see, but he couldn't use them with the two men hanging onto his arms.

He had to help them. He couldn't let them meet their deaths here, because they were carrying him. He looked around and saw it. "Over there! Head for that hangar over there!"

Clifton glanced in the direction Eckhart indicated and turned. DeWalt followed without question. He seemed to be running as fast as Clifton, so maybe he wasn't as hopeless as Eckhart had originally thought.

Clifton veered for the hangar entrance when a blast of light split the night from inside. Three more armored vehicles charged out

and almost flattened the three men.

"Right!" Eckhart said. "Between the buildings!"

Clifton dove out of the vehicles' path and plunged into the shadows between the hangar and a barracks shed next door. He stumbled against the barracks and started to lean Eckhart against the wall. Clifton and DeWalt gasped and panted for every breath. DeWalt wheezed with every inhalation, but no one insulted him about it.

Eckhart grasped for his rifle when an ominous screeching of tires made all three look up. The vehicles that had just left the hangar bounced onto the tarmac and immediately skidded backward to charge the barracks. Their engine noise escalated to a deafening roar.

"Go!" Clifton grabbed Eckhart's arm, and DeWalt responded instantly. The two men seized Eckhart, and he dropped his rifle against its strap.

"Get behind the barracks!" Eckhart told them. "Go down the alley to the launch terminal."

Clifton turned right again. He and DeWalt had to turn Eckhart side-on to squeeze between buildings on their way back to where they'd left the *Marathon*.

They made it two hundred yards and pivoted into another causeway between a weapons bunker and the station's foundry. Clifton wedged Eckhart into a tight corner where the towering buildings sheltered the trio from view.

"How much…further…to the…ship?" Clifton gasped.

"The landing zone is just on the other side of the foundry." Eckhart took the opportunity to pull two rifles forward. "Once we get on the zone, we just have to cross it to the ship."

"Can you signal the crew?" DeWalt asked. "Can you get them to come to us?"

"And risk getting the whole ship blown to smithereens? I'd rather not, if you don't mind."

"How did you land on this station anyway?" Clifton asked. "Did you use a different façade?"

"Yep. That's another reason not to involve the ship in fighting off the Regiment. The ship is our only way out of here, so we have to leave it safe where it is. It's bad enough the Regiment will see us trying to leave in it. Then all bets are off."

"How do you know so much about this station?" DeWalt asked.

“Have you been here before?”

Eckhart noticed Clifton watching him, and looked away. “The time I dropped you off was my first time here.”

“How do you know so much about its layout, then?” DeWalt insisted.

A muffled boom from across the station saved Eckhart from answering, but he thought he recognized a hint of understanding in Clifton’s expression. All Regiment stations used the same basic layout. Anyone who spent any kind of time on one would know their way around the others.

Clifton and DeWalt glanced around the corner, and Eckhart dragged himself over to see. He felt like he might faint from the pain. The three men gazed across the landing zone, crowded with ships of all sizes.

Regiment soldiers swarmed the area, searching every vessel parked on the station. Their numbers had quadrupled since Eckhart had left the *Marathon*.

He couldn’t even see the ship from here, and not because of the soldiers. He had steered the other two to the opposite side of the landing zone from where he’d left the ship. They would have to either traverse the whole zone, or circle the area and risk getting caught by the soldiers hunting them.

“How do we get through there?” Clifton asked.

Eckhart surveyed the guards closest to him. “The easiest way would be to disguise you two as Regiment officers like me…”

“Except that you can’t walk,” Clifton pointed out. “That would tend to give it away.”

Eckhart shot him a grin. He was starting to like this guy. “Yeah. It would tend to.”

“So what’s plan B?” DeWalt asked.

“You should go on without me,” Eckhart said flatly. It was true. Clifton frowned, but he could see that he agreed.

“We aren’t leaving you,” DeWalt said firmly, surprising him.

“Don’t be a fool—”

“Not because I care about you, Eckhart. Because your damn alien crew will just kill us as soon as we show up without you.”

“Of course they won’t.”

“Says you,” Clifton said.

Eckhart felt anger welling up. “You both still think they’re monsters.”

“And you still don’t see that they *are*,” DeWalt said stubbornly.

“Let’s just try and get you back to the ship with us,” Clifton said diplomatically.

Eckhart scoffed and looked out into the zone when an idea came to him. He pointed at an ambulance rumbling across to their left. “What about that?”

It skidded around and backed up to the medical kiosk adjacent to the landing zone. The medics wheeled out a body on a stretcher. A white sheet covered all but the patient’s head.

“You want to steal an ambulance?” Clifton snorted. “It would be easier if we just ran across the zone.”

“Probably. Maybe we’ll just…” Eckhart looked over his shoulder.

He didn’t have time to call a warning. He jerked up his rifle and fired at a troop of soldiers cutting off the alley behind them.

Clifton whipped around, followed by DeWalt. They all fired, and the soldiers took cover behind the flanking buildings, but the noise drew more troops from the landing zone.

DeWalt saw them first. He pivoted backward and stumbled into Eckhart. He lost his footing and toppled to the ground, but Eckhart didn’t have time to protest.

He flipped onto his back and pawed his rifles into position. He fired one in Clifton’s direction and one toward the soldiers attacking DeWalt.

His first rifle ran out of ammo and he fumbled for his third, but when he looked past DeWalt’s legs toward the landing zone, Eckhart’s heart sank.

Several Regiment gunships launched from the zone and wheeled toward the fight. They would be here any second. They would rain destruction on the three men, and that would be the end.

Eckhart started to lower his rifle. He inhaled to call to his friends to stand down when a deep, almost inaudible growl vibrated the ground beneath him. He searched for the source, and jumped a foot out of his skin when one of the vehicles parked at the end of the alley detonated in a towering explosion.

DeWalt stopped shooting and spun around to stare. The three men gazed in shock as three more vehicles went up in flame and shredded steel.

Eckhart’s eyes hurt from staring as another Regiment vehicle screeched into view. It wedged its nose into the gap, and Alice

stood up behind her massive pounder. “Get on! Hurry up!” She yanked the huge gun upward and fired at one of the Regiment gunships closing in from above.

Her rocket whistled through the night sky and landed in a direct hit on the gunship’s auxiliary Datrium reservoirs. The ship ruptured in a rippling cloud of fire. Another cluster of ships converging on the battle retreated out of harm’s way.

“We got company!” Bing’s multiple eyes swiveled behind their vehicle as he gripped the steering wheel. “We better go now, if we’re going at all.”

Dallas hopped off the vehicle and tromped toward Eckhart. He got ten feet before more soldiers sprang out of nowhere behind the vehicle and fired.

Dallas swung up both arms and blasted countless shots forward and behind. He carved a path to the trio and picked up Eckhart. “Move it!” he thundered to Clifton and DeWalt.

They sprang into the vehicle, but there was barely enough room for Dallas to get on once the other four took their places. He put his foot on the running board, and Bing gunned the engine so hard Dallas almost fell off.

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23

“Get ready to shoot!” Alice pivoted her pounder upward again and blasted another gunship out of the air. She slammed it down just as fast and took aim at soldiers, vehicles, and more ships blocking the friends’ escape onto the landing zone.

Eckhart dragged his legs around and sat facing backward. He propped his rifle between his feet to stabilize it against the vehicle’s shuddering bounces.

Gunshots shrieked past his head from behind. He looked forward, and immediately regretted it when he saw the force arrayed to stop them, but at that moment, Alice cut loose with her pounder.

Her first shot hit one of the foremost vehicles. It vaulted off the ground and the explosion cleared most of the soldiers, but it didn’t touch the gunships.

She fired again and again. The noise made Eckhart’s ears ring, but he couldn’t watch anymore. More vehicles and troops tailed the crew out of the alley and onto the landing zone.

Soldiers charged from all sides, but this time, the crew was ready for them. Dallas covered one side of the vehicle by himself, and Alice carved a swath of destruction with her pounder. Bing careened through it and slalomed between ships, vehicles, ambulances, and anything else standing in his way.

DeWalt covered the vehicle’s left side, while Clifton and Eckhart held the pursuit at bay. “Tell Rixby we’re coming in!” Eckhart yelled up to Dallas.

“She already knows!” Alice called back. “She’s monitoring us through the Regiment scanners.”

Gunships hounded the vehicle’s flight over the landing zone. Their howling engines buffeted it from side to side. Bing had to fight the wheel to avoid crashing into the parked vessels on all sides.

“The *Marathon* is straight ahead!” Alice announced.

“What are you doing?” DeWalt yelled at Bing. “You’re going to crash into that…whatever it is.”

A 500-kiloton Colossus-class battle cruiser blocked the fugitives’

path, and Bing drove straight for it. He slammed his foot down hard and braced his arms as the ship got nearer.

"Duck!" Alice roared.

She locked her pounder into position and unloaded. The gun boomed in Eckhart's ear as dozens of shots belched from the weapon. Bing didn't slow down. In fact, he drove faster.

The soldiers standing guard returned fire, but when neither Alice nor Bing let up, they dove out of the way. Alice's pounder punched through the ship's hull. "Get *down*, I said!" she bellowed, and the ship groaned as the first internal explosions shook it inside the hull.

Eckhart dove onto the floor. He'd lost hold of his rifle, but that didn't matter anymore. He wrapped his arms around his head before he noticed DeWalt still staring at the Colossus in horrified fascination.

Eckhart and Clifton grabbed him at the same time. They grappled him to the floor, and Clifton flattened himself on top of DeWalt. At that moment, the Colossus erupted. The impact lifted the vehicle off its wheels. It cartwheeled through the air, and searing heat licked Eckhart's cheeks.

He braced for the next shockwave. The vehicle slammed down on its side. The wheels screamed, and he heard another noise he didn't recognize.

Eckhart pried his head off the floor and peered through glowing flames. Fire and combusting fuel surrounded him in a magical sphere of flickering light, but it didn't come near him. Was he dead?

Alice grabbed his arm. "Get up! We have to get out of here!"

Eckhart tried to pull himself up. Alice lost patience with him and hoisted him over her shoulder easily. She carried him off the crashed vehicle. Clifton supported DeWalt, and Dallas was busy extricating Bing from the driver's seat.

Rixby toddled around the vehicle, chirping at everyone. "We must get out of the station as soon as possible. I don't know how long the Celdian will hold."

Eckhart surveyed the battle site, but he couldn't see much beyond the dome of Celdian shielding them from the fire. The *Marathon* parked right next to the overturned vehicle, and the Celdian held the fire at bay until the crew got inside.

Dallas carried Bing into the cargo hold. "He's out cold. He won't be producing any Eplite for a while."

“Forget that,” Eckhart returned. “Let’s just get out of here.”

Alice carried Eckhart to the bridge and put him in his seat. Some function had returned in all the commotion, but the more he could move his legs, the more the pain ran up and down his spine. He hoped Bing got better faster than he’d let on to Dallas.

Rixby waddled over to her workstation and started manipulating the controls. “The Regiment has the station surrounded. We won’t be able to fight our way through them, even with the Celdian at full strength.”

“Behind the medical kiosk, Rixby.”

“Behind the medical kiosk!” Clifton repeated. “But that’s—”

“Position the *Marathon* directly over the Datrium storage depot,” Eckhart said.

“The Celdian will barely hold an assault of that magnitude,” Rixby argued. “It could damage the ship.”

“We can replace the Celdian. Just do it. It’s our only chance.”

Eckhart activated the engines, and the *Marathon* lifted out of the fire. He tried not to see the Celdian shield strength plummeting by the minute. It restored itself once the ship left the fire behind, but not for long.

It dipped dangerously again the moment the ship left the fire. Dozens of Regiment fighter craft pounced and battered the ship with gunshots. They almost knocked the *Marathon* back into the flames.

Eckhart hit the thrusters and the ship streaked forward, but he didn’t try to leave the station. He couldn’t, with so many Regiment ships blocking his path.

He hurtled past the medical kiosk, heading straight for a huge spherical dome behind it. He spat shots back at the Regiment pursuing him, just to make sure they stayed close.

“Fourteen hundred meters!” Rixby squeaked. “Celdian is less than forty percent.”

“What kind of shielding does the depot have?” Eckhart called back.

“Nothing we can’t handle,” Alice reported from her own station. “One thousand meters.”

“You need to be within five hundred meters to maximize—”

Eckhart didn’t hear the rest of Rixby’s instructions. The Regiment rotated in front of him. Did they know what he planned to do?

“Ten more Colossuses moving in!” Alice called over her shoulder. “You better make your move now.”

“Seven hundred meters!” Rixby warned. “Get directly above the storage depot.”

Booms and smashes shuddered through Eckhart’s chair. “Celdian is less than ten percent!” Alice reported. “We won’t survive the explosion.”

“Five hundred meters!” Rixby shrieked. “Fire!”

Eckhart didn’t think twice. He slammed down the regulators, and the ship’s guns erupted. Two shots hit the depot’s outer dome. They vanished inside with no effect.

Eckhart gripped the regulators so tightly he couldn’t let go now if he tried. The Colossuses bombarded the *Marathon* so hard from behind that the ship staggered forward and almost crashed into the Datrium storage depot.

“Increase your flight angle!” Alice yelled. “Get above the—”

One of the Regiment ships wheeled in behind the *Marathon*. Eckhart’s senses registered a dozen details at once. The enemy fired a crushing volley that would have crippled the *Marathon*.

Eckhart yanked the nose back and punched the thrusters. The *Marathon* buzzed the depot’s outer skin and skimmed directly above it.

The Colossus’s shot nailed into the depot, and the Datrium inside obliterated in a supernova of destruction. Eckhart didn’t hear or feel the explosion. The forward shockwave caught the *Marathon* and lifted the ship skyward.

The outward-spreading wave incinerated the Regiment and the rest of the Kukuri station in one catastrophic blast.

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24

Bing's head flopped to one side. His bleary eyes fluttered, and he opened them on one side of his face. "Am I...am I alive?"

Eckhart smiled at him. "I hope so. Can you feel your legs?"

Bing made a face and wriggled his many limbs. "I think so. Where are we?"

"We're on the *Marathon*. You got hurt. We were worried about you."

Bing rolled his head the other way, but Eckhart couldn't tell if Bing could see the rest of the crew watching him.

Eckhart couldn't feel *his* legs, but he didn't tell Bing that. Dallas had done what he could to numb the pain with their medical supplies, but no one on the crew could repair what was really wrong with Eckhart. Only Bing could do that.

Bing spotted Alice. She stood by his head and pressed a cool cloth to his forehead. "Did we—did we save the ship?"

"Yes, we saved it," she replied. "Now we just have to worry about you. Do you think you can produce enough Eplite to heal your legs?"

Bing frowned. "What's wrong with my legs?"

She hooked one arm under his neck and lifted him into a sitting position. He gasped and groaned, but at least he didn't pass out when she sat him up.

"Oh, that!" he exclaimed when he saw three of his lower limbs squashed to a pulp. "That should be easy."

Bing craned his weight out of Alice's arms and leaned forward. He spat a mouthful of Eplite onto the wounds, and they immediately started to heal.

"Ugh!" DeWalt complained. "I'll never get used to that."

"Did you know the Fediex of the planet Ramu use Eplite as a food?" Rixby chimed in. "It's considered a delicacy. They keep Yakit as livestock. They harvest the Eplite for use in their traditional ceremonies."

"Let's not talk about that." Bing swung his legs off the table and grinned at everyone. "I feel fine! When do we get back to work?"

"After you lie down and heal up for at least a day," Dallas

replied. “You’re high on endorphins, pal.”

“If this is what it feels like to be high on endorphins, I should injure myself more often.” Bing patted himself down, grinning like a child. “I might injure myself every other day if it feels like this.”

“At least wait until we finish our next maneuver,” Eckhart interrupted. “We need you functioning to get the Oksite crystal back.”

Bing turned around to make another smart-ass remark, but he stopped when he noticed Eckhart sitting there. “What’s wrong with you?”

“I got hurt, but unlike you, I’m not high on endorphins.”

“He can’t walk,” Alice explained.

“Well, why didn’t you tell me?” Bing fired back. “Why did you let me go on like a dope about injuring myself to get high? What’s wrong with you people?”

“We were worried about you,” Dallas replied. “We didn’t want to pressure you to heal the rest of us when we weren’t sure you were going to be okay.”

“Pressure me! I’m supposed to be the medic on this damn ship!” Bing sprang to Eckhart’s chair and lifted him onto the table where Bing had just been lying. “Don’t ever do that again. If someone is hurt, for Galaxy’s sake, tell me. Don’t let me wax poetic like a fool.”

Clifton laughed, but he was the only one who did. Bing squeezed Eckhart’s legs gingerly with his tentacle limbs. He started at the ankles and worked his way up Eckhart’s thighs. “Can you feel that?”

“I can’t feel anything, except the pain.”

“Where’s the pain?”

“Well…everywhere. It isn’t coming from my legs. It feels like it’s coming from…” Eckhart touched his stomach. “Here.”

Bing made a careful study of Eckhart from top to bottom.

“This is serious,” Bing finally announced. “I need to give you some Eplite by mouth, but I’m not sure even that will fix the problem. You might have a damaged spinal cord, which means—”

“A damaged spinal cord!” DeWalt cried. “You mean he’ll never walk again?”

“If you shut up long enough to let him finish,” Dallas told him, “You’d hear that the Yakit have abilities not even the Regiment can match. If Earth treated the fringe aliens with more respect, we might have a cure for spinal cord injuries by now.”

“As I was saying before I was interrupted by certain loud

noises," Bing went on, "I need to run a few scans on your back to find out exactly where the damage is. I might have to operate and treat it directly at the site."

"Do whatever you have to do," Eckhart told him. "I trust you."

Bing moved over to Eckhart's head. "I'm going to give you some Eplite by mouth, and then I'm going to sedate you. You won't feel anything until I wake you up with the bad news."

"Okay. Do it." Eckhart stretched out on the table, and Bing leaned over his face.

DeWalt turned away with a grimace. "I can't watch this."

Bing spat a mouthful of Eplite onto Eckhart's tongue. The sticky goo tasted like molasses. Eckhart always liked that taste. The Eplite instantly eased the pain like no medication could. The dull sensation that had driven him out of his mind ever since he and his friends had escaped from the biocontainment block was gone.

Bing moved around the infirmary and ended up on Eckhart's other side. "I'm going to fully sedate you now."

Eckhart snapped awake with no sense that any time had passed. He'd shut his eyes with Alice, Rixby, Dallas, and Clifton surrounding him. Now he was alone, and someone had dimmed the lights.

"How's it hanging, big guy?" Bing asked from Eckhart's right. "You look so much more attractive now that you've had your beauty rest."

Eckhart pried up his head and looked around. "Where is everyone?"

"They're arming up for an assault on Drao, but Rixby isn't sure the Oksite crystal is on the planet anymore."

Eckhart's eyebrows shot up. "Where is it, then?"

"Not so fast. You didn't tell me you were injured until you found out I was okay. Now tell me how you're doing before you go off and get yourself killed again."

Eckhart searched his body. "I feel all right."

"Can you move your legs now? What am I saying? Of course you can. There's nothing wrong with you."

Eckhart wiggled his toes and then flexed his feet. "You're right. Everything works fine."

"Of course it does. I wouldn't have woken you up if I didn't fix your spine."

Eckhart had to laugh at his friend's jokes. "So…you would have

left me sedated for the rest of eternity?"

"You got that right. What you don't know can't hurt you, but what you *did* know could hurt *me*. You might decide I didn't do my job if I failed to fix you."

"I wouldn't do that. You know me better than that, Bing."

Bing grinned. "Well, you *are* my boss, and we all like to kid ourselves that you're a big, strong badass when you're actually the weakest of the whole crew."

"What about Rixby? I'm stronger than she is."

Bing rolled his many eyes. "That's nothing to be proud of. "

Eckhart laughed. It was good to be back and sharing a private moment of relaxation before he went back into combat.

Just then, Dallas strolled in—except that Dallas didn't stroll. He trooped. He clomped. He stomped. He marched. "Hey. You're awake. Are you back to normal?"

"He's fine," Bing replied. "He was just telling me that he's stronger than Rixby."

Dallas burst out laughing. His laugh boomed out of his armored body and made the infirmary ring. "You must be feeling better. Can you walk?"

"Let's find out." Eckhart eased himself off the table and rested his bare feet on the floor. They felt strange, like they hadn't been used in a long time. "How are our other Earthling troublemakers doing?"

"They're good," Dallas replied. "Clifton wants to help us get the crystal back."

"And DeWalt?"

Dallas jerked one shoulder sideways, but he didn't answer. Bing looked away.

Eckhart looked back and forth between his friends. "What are you not telling me? What is DeWalt doing?"

"Nothing," Dallas replied. "I mean, besides trying to come with us."

"To Drao?"

"Exactly. He thinks that because he helped out on Kukuri, that he's…"

"A gangster," Bing interjected.

"A fighter," Dallas corrected.

"He thinks he's street," Bing explained.

"Gutter, is more like," Dallas finished.

Eckhart groaned and eased himself onto his feet. His legs supported him perfectly. “I appear to be upright, so I’d better go straighten him out.”

“Put your shoes on first,” Bing replied.

“And take this.” Dallas held out Eckhart’s sidearm. “In case he decides to challenge you for the alpha position just above Rixby.”

Dallas and Bing both laughed, and Eckhart couldn’t help but chuckle.

He went back to his cabin and changed into his own clothes. He thought about throwing the old Regiment uniform in the incinerator. He never wanted to wear it again as long as he lived, but there might be another use for it in the future. Better to be prepared for the worst.

He felt better when he put on his boots and holstered his sidearm. He went to the bridge and found it deserted.

The *Marathon* was in orbit over Drao. As in past visits, no one bothered the ship here. The criminal elements rife on this planet considered the *Marathon* and its crew one of their own. None of them had anything to worry about from each other—until today.

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25

Eckhart stepped into the cargo hold and immediately regretted it. Alice, Rixby, Clifton, Dallas, and Bing all stood together on one side of the hold, and they were all armed for Armageddon—except for Rixby, of course.

They all faced down against DeWalt, who plastered his spine against one wall and did his DeWalt version of standing up to the rest of the crew.

"You aren't going anywhere," Dallas told him. "You're going to stay right here where you can't get the rest of us killed."

"If you so much as lay a finger on a weapon while I'm around," Alice snarled through her mask, "I'll personally tear you a new asshole and see how you like that."

Eckhart crossed the hold in a few steps. "What's going on here?" But he already knew.

"You can't leave me behind!" DeWalt insisted. "I can handle myself. I proved that on Kukuri."

"Accidentally bumping your finger against the trigger doesn't qualify as handling yourself," Bing informed him.

"But I'll be all alone on the ship while you're…" DeWalt waved toward the closed ramp. "I mean, this mission concerns me as much as the rest of you."

"That's where you're wrong," Dallas countered. "This is our business, not yours."

"The crystal *is* my business." DeWalt turned to Clifton. "I can't believe you're siding with them."

"Well, I am." Clifton stuffed his hand into DeWalt's jacket and pulled out a sidearm tucked under the banker's armpit. "You won't need this."

"Or this." Bing had snaked one of his sinuous limbs behind DeWalt's back, and drew a second weapon from DeWalt's belt.

"Or this." Alice extended one of her skeletal arms and ripped DeWalt's shirt down the front. He gasped in horror at her presumption and immediately tried to cover a third gun sticking out of his waistband, but she snatched it first.

Eckhart laughed. He couldn't help it. "What's the matter,

DeWalt? Do you fancy yourself a banger now?"

DeWalt frowned. "A what?"

"A cracka jacka," Dallas said.

"More like a peewee," Alice hissed.

DeWalt furrowed his brow even deeper. "What are you talking about?"

"You aren't going down to the surface." Eckhart went over to the weapons locker and started taking down Halfanite blocks. "It's too dangerous."

"For us," Alice barked.

"You won't be alone," Dallas went on. "Rixby will be here."

"We wouldn't want you to touch anything," Rixby told him.

"Or push any buttons," Bing finished.

DeWalt glanced down at Rixby, and his face spasmed. "Why does she have to stay?"

"Because she's defenseless," Eckhart explained. "She's safer here. Drao might not be a Regiment station, but it's just as dangerous. It's a hotbed of criminals, and they might do anything to stop us from retaking the crystal."

"*I'm* not defenseless."

"You are now." Alice checked the sidearm she'd taken from DeWalt, and pocketed it.

"You do exactly what Rixby tells you while we're gone," Eckhart told him. "That's a direct order. Do you understand what a direct order is?"

DeWalt opened his mouth, shut it again, and nodded.

"If it makes you feel any better," Clifton added, "I'm not going, either. I get to stay here and twiddle my thumbs while they have all the fun."

"But you could go," DeWalt replied. "They would let you go if they were going to do any real fighting."

"We don't want to do any real fighting, DeWalt. Trust me." Eckhart turned away, and this time, the others went with him. They left DeWalt standing in the same place. Eckhart pitied him, but until DeWalt developed a few more survival skills, he was a liability to everyone.

"We don't even know where the crystal is," Bing remarked. "It might be back in Regiment hands by now."

"I'm not sure it's still on Drao," Rixby replied. "If it is, it's well hidden."

“We don’t need to know where it is,” Eckhart decided.

“Then why are we here?” Dallas asked.

“Because Helvall knows where it is.”

“And we’re going to twist his arm until he tells us where it is,” Alice snarled. “Knowing him, it might just come right off.”

Considering Helvall was a Nalzai, known for their ability to slough off their outer skin at will, that wasn’t an idle threat.

“No one is going to twist anything until I say so,” Eckhart countered. “Say it, Alice.”

She made another hissing snarl through her mask and turned away, hunching her shoulders. “I won’t twist anything until you say so.”

“Good. Let’s rock it.”

Eckhart pulled on his gas mask and popped the ramp. Stinging gas pricked his skin, and the crew took off running for the tavern.

Clifton waved to them as they vanished into the gas. He couldn’t go with them. Eckhart showing his face on this planet was one thing. A completely unknown Earthling making an appearance here would be pushing things too far, especially considering that both Clifton and Eckhart were on the run for their lives.

They found the tavern almost identically populated as it had been during their previous visit. The same proportion of aliens sat in the same positions, with the same servants trucking food and drink to one and all.

The same strangers looked up to watch the *Marathon* crew pass, but the fact that Eckhart and his friends were all armed for doomsday attracted no more notice than they had when they’d been unarmed.

Eckhart parked himself in front of Helvall. The alien looked up with his sagging eyes and registered no reaction at all. Helvall didn’t even glance at the crew’s weapons, but he was too astute not to notice them.

“So you stole the slugs back, Eckhart. The Regiment will be as anxious as ever to display your head as a trophy.”

“What did you do with the Oksite crystal, Helvall? Did you sell it already?”

“I passed it to Vuldak Dhaddet. He paid nineteen for it. He knows his collectibles. Vuldak is a good client.”

Eckhart raised one eyebrow. “Is that so?”

“It is so. You should have sold him the crystal, Eckhart. We

could have saved all this trouble."

Eckhart let the matter drop and nodded. "Thanks for the information, Helvall. I guess I'll be on my way to Chanus."

Helvall bobbed his drooping head and went back to counting his Seron seeds as before.

Eckhart turned around and jerked his chin toward the door. He raised his mask to put it back on when Alice grabbed his arm. "That's it? You're just going to walk away? Don't tell me you believe that flimsy tale."

"Did you hear me say you could twist his arms off, Alice?"

She hunched her bony shoulders. "No."

"Then get back to the ship and don't argue."

She grunted something under her breath. Eckhart couldn't help noticing Dallas and Bing studying him too closely, too.

Eckhart pulled the mask over his face and herded his friends out of the tavern. They made their way back to the *Marathon* and took refuge in the cargo hold.

"That was fast!" DeWalt remarked. "Did you find out where the crystal is?"

"That was just the first step. Let's go."

"Go!" DeWalt repeated. "Go where?"

Eckhart lowered his mask. "Wherever Helvall goes."

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26

Alice barged past Eckhart and charged so threateningly at DeWalt that he retreated against the wall. He gave her plenty of room to pass.

"Let's get to the bridge," Alice snapped.

The rest of the crew hung back and accompanied Eckhart to the bridge, where Rixby scurried over her workstation in a state of high excitement.

"You have him?"

"Nalzai lifesigns are unique," Rixby chirped. "But Helvall masks his."

"So you don't have him?"

Rixby danced from foot to foot, a sure sign that she was proud of herself. "He's not so crafty. I have him. He's moving through the tavern."

Eckhart exhaled. "Stick with him, Rixby."

"Where's he going?" Clifton asked.

Eckhart didn't answer. He was surprised that Clifton had come with the rest of the crew. He was even more surprised when DeWalt showed up to watch the proceedings, too.

"Keep an eye on him, Rixby," Eckhart ordered. "He'll be watching us just as closely, so we'll have to mask our movements."

"He's leaving the tavern. He's slipping out the back."

Eckhart went over to her station. He, Dallas, Bing, and Alice leaned over to watch the one Nalzai life sign leave the tavern and set off across the village.

"He's entering his carriage shed," Rixby reported.

"Carriage!" DeWalt parroted. "What's a carriage?"

"He's firing up. He's leaving."

"Trace his engine signature. Find out where he goes."

"I can't!" Rixby chirped. "The gas is disguising the signature. He's disappearing!"

Eckhart sprang for his chair and hit the regulators. "Hold onto something. We're launching."

"You're leaving?" Clifton asked. "What about the crystal?"

"Keep quiet!" Alice roared from her station.

Eckhart blocked out all the distractions and rocketed the *Marathon* into the atmosphere. He vaulted high above the swirling gas clouds into the thin, clear sky in the outer stratosphere.

"Got him again," Rixby said. "He's heading for the Zhiruk Mountains."

Eckhart maneuvered the ship in that direction. He skimmed the dense gas banks, but he made sure to stay above them. If they could spot Helvall through all that murk, then he could spot the *Marathon* just as easily.

"He's landing!" Rixby reported. "He's entering a tunnel in the mountainside."

"We're losing him!" DeWalt lamented, but he shut his mouth when Alice shot him another deadly look.

"Can you pinpoint the tunnel entrance?" Eckhart asked.

"I have the coordinates."

"Can you pick up anything—any guards? Any defensive movements?"

"Nothing. They must all be inside."

"It's a trap," Clifton remarked.

"Of course it's a trap." Eckhart stood up. "Let's go."

He headed for the bulkhead to leave the bridge. "Wait!" Rixby peeped. "He's coming back out on the other side. I almost missed it. Clever."

Eckhart rushed over to her workstation. "Where's he going?"

"He's going to that village there."

She pointed to a spot on her chart. The signal from Helvall's carriage reappeared on the opposite of the mountain. The mountain concealed it, making it look like Helvall had taken refuge inside the mountain.

Now the whole crew watched him fly to a different village and land in plain sight.

"He must use that mountain tunnel as a dodge to shake off anyone following him," Alice said.

"He's entering a building at the edge of town," Rixby said. "No guards there, either. It appears completely dark and deserted."

"Except for Helvall, of course," Bing added.

"And the crystal," Dallas chimed in.

"He'll still be expecting us." Alice picked up her rifle. "He'd be a fool not to."

"Then let's not disappoint him," Eckhart replied. "Set us down

on the outskirts of town, Rixby. The rest of you come with me—you, too, Clifton."

DeWalt stepped forward. "What about…?"

"Not you, DeWalt. Stay here."

Eckhart walked away. He listened for his crew's familiar footsteps following him. He didn't hear DeWalt following.

They returned to the cargo hold and armed up in silence. Alice gave Clifton a spare mask and body armor to protect him from the gas.

Eckhart buckled on his own armor while he observed the others checking their weapons. Clifton went through the usual Regiment protocol of counting the number of shots in his magazine, adjusting the sights, and squinting through the barrel to make sure it was clear.

Eckhart pushed those thoughts away. Between himself, Dallas, and Clifton, this crew was tipping dangerously in the Regiment's direction. He didn't like it.

He'd never had to think about Dallas being Regiment reserve before. Dallas' prosthetics didn't require the same checking. His movements diverged so drastically from anything Regiment related, Eckhart could easily forget that Dallas was Regiment reserve at all.

Eckhart didn't think of himself as Regiment anymore, either. He didn't want to be, but Clifton's presence had brought it all back. Did Eckhart go through those protocols without even realizing it? Did Eckhart remind Dallas of his old Regiment comrades?

Clifton pulled his mask over his face, and the vision evaporated. He wasn't Regiment. He was as much a fringe tramp as the rest of the *Marathon* crew.

Eckhart slipped his own mask over his face and dropped into that silent mental battle zone. He no longer cared if the people to his right or left were Regiment or anything else. That didn't matter, as long as they shot their weapons in the right direction.

The crew advanced into the shadowy darkness outside the village. The gas clouds blocked all but the faintest light from reaching the surface. The village hugged the ground with the same decrepit coal-grey slouch as all the other villages on this wretched planet.

They didn't run this time. Their body armor protected them enough that they could take more precautions in approaching Helvall's hideout.

Eckhart pointed to the building Rixby had indicated as Helvall's destination. The carriage sat parked in a shed next door, but not a wink of light shone from any of the windows. If Eckhart didn't just watch Helvall fly here, he would never have known anyone was here.

He pointed to the left and held up two fingers. Dallas nodded, and he and Bing slipped off in that direction. Eckhart directed Alice and Clifton to go right. They skirted the building and vanished into the shadows.

Eckhart tiptoed up to the front door. How long would he have after he entered the building before Helvall's henchmen attacked? They might start shooting the moment Eckhart opened the door.

Dallas and Bing came back, followed shortly by Alice and Clifton. All four shook their heads at Eckhart. The place was utterly deserted—on the outside, at least.

Eckhart moved aside, and Dallas positioned himself in front of the door. The other four flattened themselves against either side of the building to wait for him to breach.

Dallas braced himself and scanned the doorposts through his helmet. Eckhart gripped his weapon and prepared himself for Dallas to breach the door, but he didn't.

At the last second before he barged straight through it, he stuck out his hand and turned the knob. It turned easily, and the door swung inward.

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27

The *Marathon* crew stepped into a dingy, dusty room scattered with broken furniture and the rotten, acid-eaten remains of overturned cabinets. The caustic vapors drifted through broken windows in the front of the building.

Eckhart surveyed the wreckage. He'd expected Helvall to lay a real trap for the *Marathon* crew. He'd expected to discover the armed thugs and mercenaries in here that should have been standing guard outside.

The whole building comprised fifty square feet at the most, and it was all empty. There was nothing here—no Helvall, no crystal, nothing.

Clifton started to lower his weapon. The sight triggered something in Eckhart's gut, and he lunged for the man. "Look out!"

His feet left the ground, and he collided with Clifton. Clifton staggered back as an explosion ripped the building apart.

Eckhart and Clifton landed hard on the floor, and Eckhart flipped off onto his back. He whipped his rifle to his shoulder and started unloading into the smoke and ash surrounding him.

Flames licked up the walls, and the toxic fog incinerated with ominous pops and hissing ruptures. Eckhart ripped his mask off and spotted Alice and Bing a few feet away.

They hunkered behind one of the broken cabinets and fired into the flames toward the south, where the crew had entered this trap. Eckhart didn't see Dallas anywhere. He didn't want to think about what had happened to his friend in the explosion. For all the many advantages his prosthetics gave him, moving fast for cover wasn't among them.

Eckhart seized Clifton and hauled the man over to join the other two. "How many?" he yelled over the noise.

"I can't see anything!" Bing replied. "There's too much gas in the way."

"I make out fifteen," Alice husked. "They're moving left to flank us. They're using ion disruptors."

Clifton scrambled to sit up. "We have to use Halfanite! We can cut them off before they get here."

“No Halfanite! One charge could burn off all the oxygen and suffocate us.” Eckhart looked around and pointed to a door across what was left of the building. The half-eaten furniture had hidden it before the explosion. “Over there! That has to be the entrance.”

“Entrance to what?” Clifton asked.

“To Helvall’s hideout. Come on.”

Alice and Bing sprang to their feet. They unloaded their weapons toward their unseen attackers. Eckhart and Clifton tore through the blistering flames.

Eckhart spotted a lumbering helmet bobbing in and out of the fog. He should have known Dallas would be unharmed.

Eckhart slammed his shoulder into the door and turned his rifle on the enemy. He couldn’t see them, so he targeted the sounds of gunfire popping beyond the fire. Clifton copied him, and they laid down covering fire for Alice and Bing to reach them. Dallas wasn’t following, but he was cutting down enemy fighters left and right, so Eckhart didn’t see a good reason to distract him.

“Now’s your chance to prove to me how big and strong you are!” Eckhart yelled to Bing. “Get this door open.”

Bing swiveled behind Clifton, Eckhart, and Alice. The three comrades created a fan of Datrium plasma sweeping through the building, but the burning gas stopped them from hitting anything.

A dense wall of sizzling gas and plasma blinded Eckhart, but he didn’t care as long as the enemy couldn’t come near.

A powerful thump shook the building, and Bing grabbed Eckhart’s sleeve. “We’re in! Go! Go!”

Eckhart backed Clifton and Alice into the darkness. He dove after them and found himself in a dark, cool, silent stairwell winding down into the ground.

The door slammed shut and closed all the mayhem and danger outside, but the silence only set Eckhart’s nerves on edge. The air down here throbbed with more danger than the surface.

Alice and Clifton reached the bottom first. The stairs entered a wide chamber glowing with pale bluish light.

Transparent towers of crystalline Ioscesten stood at strategic intervals around the chamber. Each one contained some magical colored gem rotating in empty space…or maybe it was some kind of suspension gel.

Helvall stood at a workstation to the right. He barely raised his bleary eyes to Eckhart and the crew when they entered his secret

underground lair. “I wondered how long it would take you to find me, Eckhart.”

“You lied to me, Helvall. You said you sold the Oksite crystal to Vuldak Dhaddet.”

Helvall made the slightest movement toward one of the Ioscesten towers behind him. The Oksite pivoted in the gentle light coming from above. It gleamed with multifaceted beauty, but all the other gems in the chamber diminished the Oksite’s magnificence somehow.

“I had to tell you something,” Helvall explained. “I had to slow you down, even if I couldn’t stop you completely.”

“Why? Why did you want to slow us down?”

Helvall went back to tapping on his workstation. “I had to come back here and trigger my security system. I had to make sure that, when you finally caught up with me, you wouldn’t be able to take the crystal off the planet.”

“What’s so special about it? What does the Regiment want to do with it?”

“That doesn’t concern me, and now it doesn’t concern you, either, Eckhart. It’s been a pleasure doing business with you.”

Helvall did something on his workstation. Eckhart saw it happen in slow motion, but his reactions didn’t kick in fast enough. The front panel of the workstation detonated out into the chamber. A flash of combusting Halfanite billowed toward Eckhart, taking a dozen of the Ioscesten towers with it.

“Look out!” Alice hurtled sideways and smashed into Eckhart. Her momentum toppled Eckhart and Bing, but she missed Clifton.

The forward edge of the blast caught Clifton and threatened to hurl him away into the chaos. But he just managed to twist away from the worst of it. He still ended up covered with debris along the back wall.

Eckhart dragged himself out of a carpet of broken Ioscesten and squinted through another wall of flame to see Helvall lunge for the Oksite crystal.

He extended his thin arms to grab the crystal when the ceiling imploded with a deafening crash. Concrete, bedrock, and destroyed Kesmite rained into the chamber, and Dallas dropped through the breach.

His shining armored body landed with a ground-shaking boom right next to Helvall. The creature reared back with a petrified

shriek then immediately changed his mind. He launched himself for the Oksite.

Just as fast, Dallas shot out one of his giant arms. His mechanical fist punched through the Ioscesten and closed on the crystal. He yanked it out of Helvall's path and left Helvall floundering to recover.

Dallas seized Helvall by the neck and hoisted him off the ground. Helvall squealed and kicked. "Let me go! I told you everything I know. I'm innocent in this! I'm a harmless merchant—nothing more."

Eckhart picked himself up and dusted himself off. The crystal shimmered in Dallas' grip.

Now the crew could get the hell out of here…and then what? They had DeWalt and the crystal in their possession—the two things every criminal mastermind in the galaxy would kill for.

Eckhart took a step forward, and the others got to their feet. They dodged through the flames toward Dallas.

Helvall wriggled harder and managed to wrench himself out of Dallas' grip…or maybe he simply did as Alice had suggested earlier and sloughed off his arm like the molting insect he was. Either way, Helvall fell to the floor and scrambled to get away from the giant looming form of Dallas.

Helvall staggered past his workstation. Eckhart turned his attention from the pathetic little creature. Helvall no longer concerned him, but at the last second, Helvall veered and touched something else on the torn metal. Another blast of Halfanite erupted from the nearest Ioscesten tower.

Glass and gel sprayed outward and peppered the crew. Alice lurched and was thrown backwards, ending up almost exactly where Clifton had landed. He caught her just before she smashed into the back wall.

"We have to get out of here," Clifton screamed to no one in particular.

Eckhart didn't disagree, but like Clifton, his human eyesight was useless in the chaos. He shook blood out of his eyes and cast a desperate glance around the chamber when another tower detonated to his left. He moved to join Clifton and Alice, only to get caught by another explosion.

Every tower in the chamber must have been similarly rigged to explode. They kept erupting and sending debris flying everywhere.

He had just spotted Bing when Dallas waved above the chaos. “This way!” he shouted.

All of them started to converge on him, only to get caught in yet another blast.

But this one felt different. It was stronger and resonated in the ground below Eckhart. He looked back and realized it was coming from the chamber’s rear wall.

This wasn’t yet another Ioscesten tower. The building itself was becoming unstable.

The whole back section of the hideout caved in with a catastrophic boom. Eckhart stumbled back, pushing his friends behind him.

Dallas rotated in front of Eckhart, but not even Dallas’ armor could protect them from the whole building disintegrating around them.

Eckhart whirled for the stairs. Clifton half-dragged Alice, with one arm wrapped around her shoulders. She hung weak in his grasp, but still managed to grit her teeth and hold her rifle up.

Eckhart charged the stairs only to stagger to a stop when he saw dozens of shadows darkening the landing. Bing bumped into him, fumbling for Halfanite primers as he did.

“You gotta be kidding me,” Bing said.

The stairs, their only way back out of the chamber, were full of armed Sone mercenaries.

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28

“I ain’t going out like this,” Alice screamed as her rifle came to life, peppering the oncoming rush of bodies.

The mercenary aliens, in turn, started shooting even before they reached the floor.

Eckhart shouldered his rifle. Bing launched his Halfanite primers up the stairs and sent a dozen fighters flying, but it barely seemed to slow them down.

“I’m out!” screamed Alice, her rifle clicking uselessly.

Dallas stepped forward to position himself between the crew and the enemy, but Eckhart already saw that it was no good.

The stairs were a natural chokepoint, but there was no telling how many men were up there. They simply didn’t have the ammunition to sit here and pick them all off. Even Dallas was surely very low on Datrium. The plasma billowed from the gun ports on his arms would soon waver and stop.

He grabbed Dallas’ elbow. “The Oksite! Detonate the crystal! It’s the only way.”

Eckhart didn’t truly know exactly what would happen if Dallas fired on the crystal with his plasma guns. It might take a few concentrated shots, but if Rixby was right, it should be enough energy to destabilize the crystal.

Without whatever weaponization was planned for it, it shouldn’t be the catastrophic planet killer explosion they feared.

But it would still be one hell of a blast, Eckhart was sure of that. It would almost certainly implode the chamber and kill the whole crew in the bargain. It might even take half the surrounding village with it, too.

But Eckhart couldn’t see any other option.

Dallas stiffened and eyed the Sone mercenaries pouring in. Dozens more shoved to get down the stairs while the frontrunners fired into the chamber. Clifton fired back with one arm, and Bing lobbed more Halfanite blocks to hold the enemy off, but it couldn’t last.

“Do it, Dallas!” Eckart ordered. “Destroy it—now!”

Dallas cocked back his wrist on the hand holding the crystal so

that it would place the crystal in the line of fire of his gun port. Eckhart unloaded the last of his ammo and heard that telltale click from his rifle. He had no more firepower left to hold the Sone at bay while Dallas held the crystal aloft.

Dallas shifted his weight and fully extended his arm to fire when, without warning, another crushing blast ripped the chamber apart—but it didn't come from the side walls or the Ioscesten towers.

It came from behind the onrushing mercenaries, and the concussion leveled the attackers fighting to reach the *Marathon* crew. The next second, another deafening crash rocked the chamber and took out at least fifty of the enemy.

Dallas and Eckhart stared in stunned disbelief as strike after strike obliterated the stairs and took out another thirty Sone trying to get into the chamber. Eckhart didn't want to believe, but his own eyesight didn't lie.

Clifton didn't have the same problem. He whirled around and dragged Alice over to Eckhart. "Get back! Over there! We can get out over there."

Clifton ran past Eckhart and Dallas, with Bing hot on his heels. They plunged into the chaos, making for the destroyed back wall. Bing pitched Halfanite charges over his shoulder toward the Sone, but without the stairs, the surviving attackers couldn't get into the chamber. It was little more than a jumble of twisted metal and twisted bodies now.

Clifton had to slow down when he reached the rubble field that was the chamber's rear wall. Dallas grabbed him, scooping up Clifton and Alice in one arm. He jumped over the rubble and landed outside.

Eckhart and Clifton immediately started coughing in the caustic gas outside. As soon as the friends showed their faces above ground, the Sone mercenaries spotted them.

The enemy wheeled and charged. Gunfire stuttered in the gloom, and Eckhart shouldered his weapon before he remembered he had no ammo left. Tears sprang to his eyes so he couldn't aim, anyways.

At least Clifton seemed to still have some firepower left, but he was as troubled by the fog as Eckhart and all he could do was fire blindly. At that moment, another brutal concussion shook the ground beneath his feet.

Eckhart stiffened for another attack, but the shot landed in the center of the Sone mob. It took out at least half of the enemy force in one blast.

Explosions pounded the Sone fighters again and again. Eckhart ran his sleeve across his eyes and peered into the dark, trying to see where the shots were coming from.

He thought for the second time he must be imagining it when he finally made out Alice's giant pounder parked right outside the village.

A lone figure sat in the seat. The gunner slammed the weapon from side to side, unleashing rockets on the Sone, but the shooter wasn't Alice.

It was DeWalt.

A blinding light cracked the gloom when the *Marathon*'s ramp swiveled open. Glorious welcoming brightness called the crew to race across the village and clamber on board.

The Sone regrouped and made another assault on the retreating friends, but DeWalt stayed where he was. He grimaced in mad fury, hammering them with rockets even when the *Marathon*'s engines erupted to full power.

Eckhart leaned over the ramp and stretched out his hand. "Come on, DeWalt! Leave it!"

DeWalt didn't respond. He shrieked in ferocious determination and unloaded another round of rockets on the enemy. Eckhart couldn't even see any fighters anymore. DeWalt had slaughtered them all without mercy.

"Come on, DeWalt!" Eckhart called. "We don't leave our crewmates behind!"

DeWalt stopped shooting and glanced over his shoulder. His eyes met Eckhart's, and DeWalt's expression changed. He clenched his jaw, sprang off the pounder, and bolted for the ship.

Eckhart grabbed him and dragged him into the hold. He slammed the ramp shut, and the *Marathon* leaped into the sky.

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EPILOGUE

Eckhart scoured the tactical web. He'd been doing it relentlessly for the last ten minutes – ever since the *Marathon* had blasted out of the gas clouds, broken orbit, and left Drao behind.

"You're sure we're still clear? Absolutely clear?"

"All clear," Rixby chirped from on top of her workstation. "Local space is dead quiet."

Only Dallas and Rixby were at their stations. Bing was down in the infirmary tending to Alice. DeWalt and Clifton were also down there. They'd sucked it up and accepted Bing's help to heal from the effects of their extended exposure to the planet's toxic gas.

Eckhart had done the same, but he'd refused to stay long. Now he felt his energy ebb. He coughed.

"You might could use a little more of Bing's attention," Dallas said, as if his old friend could read his thoughts.

"In a bit." Eckhart slumped over his seat and propped his hands on the back to support himself to catch his breath. His legs trembled and his knees turned to water, now that he didn't have to worry about someone trying to kill him—yet.

For another full minute, no one spoke as the *Marathon* continued to slice through space.

"What do we do now?" Dallas asked at last. "Every bounty hunter in seven galaxies will be searching for us."

"They aren't looking for us," Rixby corrected. "They're looking for DeWalt and the crystal. We need to find a way to get rid of one or both."

Eckhart sighed heavily, then coughed again. Dallas was right. He needed to return to the infirmary. "For the moment, we need somewhere safe to hide and regroup. Then we can figure out what to do next."

Dallas and Rixby exchanged a look.

"And where might that be?" Dallas asked.

Eckhart glanced around. He was almost glad that Alice wasn't here. She wouldn't like this one bit. "There's one place I can think of. Or rather, one person I can think of. He owes me. And I suppose I owe him."

“Who?” Rixby asked.

He gave a knowing look in Dallas’ direction. “You should know just who I mean.”

It was always impossible to read him through his helmet, but the double-take he gave was unmistakable. “Him? Really?”

“Who?” Rixby asked again.

In answer, Eckhart said, “Set a course for Zuic. I need to visit an old … friend. That’s enough light-years away that we’ll all have some time to rest.”

Rixby froze on her console. “Zuic? As in, *the* Zuic?”

“There’s only one.”

“Are you sure?” Dallas asked. “If we’re going to attract every trigger finger who wants to make a buck, do we really want to go where every single one of them is?”

Eckhart stood and headed for the bridge door. “The only one who matters is there. If we aren’t safe there, we aren’t safe anywhere.”

As the bridge doors closed, he heard Dallas murmur to Rixby, “We definitely aren’t safe anywhere.”

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HIDDEN WORLD

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PART 1

SNAKE PIT

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1

“Fifteen bogeys coming in fast from fourteen degrees descendant, forty-five degrees latitude, seventy degrees longitude,” Alice announced from her station.

“How’s the Celdian holding up?” The ship fought against Eckhart’s efforts to stabilize its trajectory. The *Marathon* wobbled dangerously to starboard.

“The Celdian is fine. It’s just the—” Another volley of smashes cut Alice off. “It’s the damn plasma we have to worry about.”

Eckhart tightened his grip on the regulators and gritted his teeth. He tried to block the enemy shots out of his mind. In fact, he tried to block the enemy out of his mind completely.

DeWalt made that impossible, though. The rich Earthling banker leaned too close to Eckhart’s seat and called into Eckhart’s ear over the noise of plasma shots sizzling along the Celdian defense shield. “Why don’t you shoot back? Defend yourself before they kill us all!”

Eckhart compressed his lips and focused on flying. The ship dipped into the murky atmosphere swirling around Zuic, but before he could descend into the thick clouds, three enemy ships surrounded the *Marathon*. They swiveled in front of the ship’s nose and plastered the bow.

Plasma explosions forced the nose up. Eckhart ripped the regulators back and punched the throttle. The *Marathon* vaulted over the enemy vessels and cleared them.

He slammed the regulators hard forward and tilted the ship into a death plunge. He dove through the atmosphere with the whole enemy contingent hot on his tail.

“Whoa!” Clifton threw his arms in front of his face to protect himself from seeing the mayhem playing out on the front screen. “What are you doing? Fight back, damn it!”

“Shut up and let me fly my own ship!” Eckhart thundered as the enemy vessels raced him toward the ground. Clouds whipped aside to reveal a vast carpet of billions of lights spread out on the planet’s surface.

“They aren’t slowing down,” Alice warned.

Eckhart clenched his teeth and fought to breathe against the

vertigo. “Just a little longer...”

The wind shrieked against the hull. The ship quaked more from the atmospheric pressure and the speed of its dive than from the ongoing bombardment.

“They aren’t breaking off!” DeWalt screamed. “You’re going to crash!”

“I said shut up!” Eckhart strained his arms against the force and hauled the ship upright just in time. The *Marathon* rocketed parallel to the surface and thousands of buildings whizzed by.

“They’re matching you,” Alice told him.

“Good.” Eckhart dared not glance down at his controls to see how much Celdian the *Marathon* had left.

“Good?!” Clifton repeated. “How can getting destroyed by a bunch of murderous criminals be good?”

“We aren’t dead yet.” Eckhart pushed the regulators all the way forward. “Any sign of them yet?”

“They’re all over the place!” DeWalt flailed his hand at the screen, where the enemy corkscrewed around the *Marathon* in a dense, brutal swarm.

Countless plasma bursts pelted the shield, but Eckhart didn’t slow down. He wasn’t even sure he could relax his arms if he tried.

“Here they come!” Rixby chirped from her perch on top of her workstation. “They’re signaling all ships to stand down.”

“Perfect,” Eckhart pounded the engines to the breaking point.

“Who are you talking about?” Clifton asked.

“They aren’t breaking off,” Alice reported. “They’re doubling down.”

“Divert Datrium to the stabilizers.”

Alice and Rixby both stopped what they were doing to stare at him. “That will—”

Too late. Eckhart smashed the regulators hard to port, and the *Marathon* howled in agony as he peeled the ship in a hard 180-degree skid. The ship spun backward and he pounded the regulators to the wall again.

The engines shrieked, and Eckhart’s cheeks dragged back into his headrest as the ship erupted forward at full speed. The maneuver upended Clifton and DeWalt, but Dallas and Bing caught them.

Eckhart hurtled straight into the thickest cluster of enemy fighters and took their shots directly on the *Marathon*’s forward

shields.

"Celdian dropping fast!" Alice called. "Break through as fast as you can."

Eckhart didn't unlock his jaws to tell her was already driving the ship as fast as he possibly could. The *Marathon* streaked into the enemy throng, and Eckhart had to practically dislocate both his shoulders, weaving in and out of the enemy ships.

He dodged one and the Celdian glanced off two others, earning more screams from Clifton and DeWalt. Eckhart heard Dallas yelling at them to be quiet, but none of this noise distracted Eckhart from what he had to do.

"Celdian down to 10%!" Alice hollered.

It didn't matter anymore. The *Marathon* zoomed out the other side of the enemy grouping. It vaulted into clear, open space lit up with billions of glowing pinpricks. At the same moment, forty fighter craft materialized out of nowhere.

DeWalt shrieked again. He and Clifton huddled so low they'd practically collapsed to their knees, but the incoming ships only whizzed around the *Marathon*. Eckhart sprinted past them and the newcomers opened fire on the enemy.

He relaxed his grip and eased back on the engines. Only then did he realize his hands were shaking from fatigue. His heart pounded, and the sweat went cold on his neck and forehead.

Alice collapsed back in her seat, and Rixby straightened up to stare at the front screen. "We did it!" she murmured. "We're in."

"What... the... hell... do... you... think... you're... doing?" DeWalt rasped. "You could have killed us all with that stunt."

A harsh voice cut him off from Eckhart's control panel. He pulled it toward him and gazed down at an alien face. Tentacles swirled around the creature's mouth and a milky, sticky ooze covered its eye slits. "All clear to land, *Marathon*. The hostiles have been dispersed."

"Thank you," he replied. "We're grateful for your help."

The screen shut off, and Eckhart turned his attention to the chart of the planet that Rixby put up on his controls. "Where do you want to land?" Alice asked.

He pointed to a skyscraper in the thickest center of the dense urban setting. "The Forsaken Pyramid is as good a place as any." He took the regulators and steered in that direction much more gingerly this time. He eased over the planet's surface, checking

every detail of the chart.

"What kind of a name is the Forsaken Pyramid?" Clifton asked. "It doesn't sound like a safe place."

"There are no safe places here," Alice snarled through her gas mask. "No one comes to Zuic unless they're illegal. That's the whole point of this planet."

"You still haven't answered my question," DeWalt cut in. "Why didn't you fire on those ships? You didn't even try to defend us. What's the matter with you?"

Eckhart started to swivel his chair around to face the man and immediately changed his mind. "You want to learn to shut your mouth when the situation calls for it, especially where we're going. People around here don't take too kindly to Earthlings shooting their mouths off at the wrong time."

DeWalt opened his mouth and then stopped himself from saying anything.

"The Aegeans have a strict no fighting policy—in the skies, at least," Dallas explained. "You can do what you want on the ground, but the penalty for fighting in the atmosphere is death."

"The who?" DeWalt stammered.

"The Aegeans," Dallas told him. "They're the ruling class on this planet. If any ships get caught fighting, the Aegeans dispatch their own peacekeepers to destroy the combatants."

DeWalt turned around to stare at the back of Eckhart's head. "So you knew? Is that why you didn't fight back—to get the peacekeepers to drive those ships off?"

Eckhart allowed himself to spin his chair around, and he swung to his feet. "Like I said, you want to learn to keep your mouth shut around people who know a hell of a lot more about the situation than you do. We're all putting our lives at risk keeping you around, and you're liable to get us all killed if you say the wrong thing to the wrong person. Remember that. Put us down on the Pyramid, Rixby, and then meet us downstairs."

He marched out of the cockpit and down to the cargo hold. He went to the weapons locker and started checking and loading his sidearms.

Alice, Bing, and Dallas turned up a second later. They joined him in loading their own weapons, while Clifton and DeWalt stood off to one side.

Dallas pointed his wrist at an aperture on the wall. An

extendable port locked into the aperture, and the indicator lights on his prosthetic arm showed Datrium plasma pumping into his internal storage capacity chambers.

"What do you want us to do?" Clifton asked. "We don't want to get underfoot."

"You won't be. You can come with us," Eckhart replied. "It's safe for you here—or as safe as anywhere is as likely to be. Either way, you won't be any safer on the ship, so you might as well get out and stretch your legs."

Bing clapped DeWalt on the shoulder hard enough to make all his weapons rattle. "Take a walk in the park and get an eyeful of all the alien freaks. It will expand your education."

"Just don't be surprised if they stare at you as hard as you're staring at them," Dallas chimed in. "Most of them have never seen an Earthling before."

"What about Eckhart?" Clifton asked. "You must have been here before."

"He doesn't count," Dallas replied.

"He's an honorary alien," Bing joked. "He's a freak like the rest of us."

"No one would dare to lift a finger against Eckhart on this planet," Alice growled. "They're all too afraid of Aistenz Trotaer."

"Who's that?" DeWalt asked.

"No one." Eckhart left the weapons locker and went over to another equipment locker. He took down a beaten canvas backpack and started loading it with Halfanite grenades and as many primers. "Let's stop taking a stroll down memory lane and concentrate on the job."

"What *is* the job?" Clifton asked.

"Don't get killed," Bing replied.

Rixby waddled into the hold and halted at Eckhart's heels. He bent down and opened the backpack in front of her. She climbed into it and wedged her short, stout body down so only her head suck out above the top zipper.

He strapped her in place and then slung the pack over his shoulder. The others followed him to the hatch.

DeWalt leaned close to Bing and half-whispered behind the others' backs. "Who's Aistenz Trotaer?"

"He's an alien small enough to fit in the palm of your hand," Bing replied. "He goes to sleep in an egg every night and the shell

seals itself to keep him safe. Then he hatches every morning, and any injuries he gets during the day are healed by the membrane inside the shell."

DeWalt's eyes widened and he gasped. "Really? That's amazing!"

"Knock it off, Bing, you lying shit!" Dallas cut between Bing and DeWalt. "Don't believe a word he says."

Bing burst out laughing. "You can't blame me for having some fun with him. He makes it so easy."

"I can't wait to see how they handle it when we get down on the ground," Rixby squeaked.

"I have an idea," Alice interjected from her place behind Eckhart. "We should set up a ring in the square and charge the locals by the head to look at the Earthlings. We can charge extra if they want to touch them."

"Great idea!" Bing cheered. "We'll make a mint."

"That's enough," Eckhart ordered. "Stay sharp, folks. We don't know if any of our new friends are hunting for us here. They could have dodged the Aegeans and gotten onto the ground."

That brought everyone back to their senses. They gathered around the hatch and stood attentive and silent while Eckhart opened it.

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2

The hatch slammed on the Forsaken Pyramid's hard steel roof. A puff of steam billowed through the night when the compressed life support air met the planet's cool atmosphere.

Thousands of miles of sparkling lights covered Zuic. Towering skyscrapers surrounded the Forsaken Pyramid, each building covered in countless lighted windows.

Eckhart led the way outside. The crew filed between dozens of ships parked on the roof. "What is this place?" Clifton murmured to Dallas.

"The Forsaken Pyramid is the headquarters of the Bloody Blossoms, an all-female Mozari death cult. They hire themselves out as assassins, and this is their temple."

DeWalt stopped dead in his tracks. "We aren't going in *there*, are we? What if they try to kill us?"

Eckhart kept walking. "We aren't going inside."

He halted in front of an elevator at the edge of the roof. The friends stood around rubbing their arms for warmth in the chilly wind whipping across the city.

When the car doors opened, Eckhart had to duck to prevent Rixby's head from banging on the doorsill. The friends crowded into the car. Dallas took up nearly half the space, and all of Bing's and Alice's weapons didn't help.

"Are you going to contact Nessor?" Rixby asked in Eckhart's ear.

He shrugged. "I might as well. We'll need to resupply with Datrium and Celdian. He's as good a contact as any."

"Don't forget you own him three chips," she reminded him. "Make sure you have them in hand when you show up asking for more."

"Thank you for reminding me," he replied over his shoulder. "I can tell him I came back especially to repay him."

"Good plan," Alice added. "You might even pay him interest for taking so long."

Eckhart bit back a grin, but Bing didn't bother. He laughed out loud. "That's Alice, our resident diplomat. Always thinking of the polite thing to do."

She rounded on him and snarled through her mask. “Watch your step, Big Mouth. Just remember I can breathe this atmosphere.”

Bing’s cheery grin evaporated and his many eyes widened in genuine fear, but before Eckhart had to intervene, the elevator opened onto the street.

The crew emerged into a dense throng of aliens from countless species. They walked in all directions at once. They climbed stairs to enter doors higher up the buildings’ sides. They descended more stairs into underground levels of more rooms, buildings, and structures constructed beneath the street.

Hawkers sold their goods on corner sidewalks, and prostitutes serviced their customers in alleys without trying to hide what they were doing. Aliens brawled in the street while onlookers gambled on the outcome. Money changed hands all over the place, and aliens led other aliens on leashes.

Chirping insects the size of birds, giant monstrous lumbering beasts of burden, flying raptors with sharp beaks and claws—they all lived and worked and haggled and argued all over the place.

Eckhart had to shoulder his way through the mobs. Even Dallas had to turn sideways to get through. The locals paid no attention to him or any of the rest of the *Marathon* crew.

They *did* pay attention to Clifton and DeWalt, though. As Eckhart expected and Dallas predicted, the aliens took a decided interest in the two Earthlings.

The crew hadn’t gone more than a dozen yards before the surrounding aliens mysteriously forgot about whatever business they were doing. They crowded around to stare at Clifton and DeWalt and blocked the friends from going any further. Some of the onlookers even poked at the two men, touched their hair, and felt their skin.

“I’ve never seen an Earthling before.” A prostitute with three heads and six arms trailed her fingertips down DeWalt’s cheek. “Do they function the same as other men?”

“Don’t lie, Hanad,” someone yelled out of the crowd. “You’ve seen Eckhart a hundred times.”

The prostitute shot Eckhart a wicked grin with one head while the other continued to examine DeWalt at close range. “I’ve never seen the way he functions. Tell me, Eckhart. Do Earthlings all function the same?”

“Why don’t you take him home and find out?” another voice

called from the other side of the circle.

Eckhart laughed, until Rixby whispered in his ear. “Across the street...under the Trophy Room sign.”

He whipped around, spotted the creature she meant, and immediately turned his attention back to the spectacle unfolding around Clifton and DeWalt. The assembled aliens were now feeling the two men’s clothes and prodding their bodies in ever-more compromising places.

Eckhart dove past Hanad and grabbed DeWalt’s arm. He towed the banker out of the mob. “Sorry, Hanad. You’ll have to finish your scientific inspection another time. Move out.”

Eckhart dragged DeWalt away, and Alice got hold of Clifton. They forced their way up the street and marched the two Earthlings away. Dallas brought up the rear to stop anyone from following them.

The aliens who’d gathered around to check out Clifton and DeWalt went back to what they were doing, but in no time, more locals stopped what they were doing and gathered to see.

Eckhart didn’t stop a second time. He rested his right hand on his sidearm and held onto DeWalt with the other. Bing brought one of his rocket launchers forward. He and Alice flanked Eckhart and smashed Clifton and DeWalt between them.

“Another three coming up behind us,” Rixby murmured in Eckhart’s ear. “They’re converging from all sides.”

“What’s going on?” DeWalt asked.

Eckhart didn’t turn around to check how close his enemies were. “We have to get off the street.”

“Will that be safe? What if the same thing happens and more people stop to check us out?”

“Forget that. We have bigger problems.”

Rixby cut Eckhart off before he could say more. “Titan Gulch—three blocks ahead.”

Eckhart nodded, but he didn’t answer. His nerves prickled and his eyes darted back and forth over all the faces around him. He recognized someone every now and then, but they couldn’t help him.

Alice pushed her way to Eckhart’s side. “We should stand and fight.”

“No.” He crossed the last block and veered into a doorway. The others hustled in after him until Dallas wedged himself under the

lintel.

Dallas started to turn back. “Keep moving,” Eckhart growled. “Get into the back. Dallas...” He stopped. He had been about to tell his friend to make himself inconspicuous, but that wasn’t possible.

Alice propelled Clifton and DeWalt into another sea of aliens. Dozens stood four bodies thick around the bar, while others clustered around tables and counters throughout the establishment.

The two Earthlings wrinkled their noses at all the different species surrounding them, but that was nothing compared to how the aliens looked at them.

Eckhart finally carved a path to a booth in the very back. He pushed Clifton and DeWalt in first, and the rest packed the two Earthlings against the wall, where they would be least visible.

“What the hell is going on?” Clifton half-whispered. “What is this place?”

“It’s a mercenary hub,” Eckhart told him. “Mercenaries come here to pick up jobs. Anyone who wants to hire someone can come here and negotiate with any number of guns for hire.”

DeWalt made a face. “Let me guess. You come here a lot.”

Eckhart nodded. “All the time. Do you have a problem with that?”

Bing scanned the crowd. “You were right, Eckhart. They don’t dare to come inside.”

“That can only mean one thing,” Alice added.

“What does it mean?” DeWalt asked. “Who are you talking about, anyway?”

“Didn’t you see those people following us?” Clifton asked. “They weren’t interested in us because we’re Earthlings.”

DeWalt curled his lip. “We aren’t Earthlings. We’re human.”

“So am I,” Rixby told him.

“We can’t hide in here forever,” Alice pointed out. “They know where we are, so they’ll just wait for us to come out.”

“Who?” DeWalt asked.

“Someone who wants you,” Dallas told him.

“And the Oksite,” Rixby added.

DeWalt’s eyes popped. “But that means... Did they follow us from Drao?”

“These aren’t Helvall’s people,” Alice told him. “The Aegeans wouldn’t let them land here.”

“They might be Vuldak’s men,” Eckhart surmised. “He probably

listened to Helvall's radio chatter and found out where we were."

"How do we get out of here, then?" Clifton asked. "If they can find us here, they can find us anywhere."

"Oh, ye of little faith!" Bing chided. "Have we ever let you down before?"

"Several times," Clifton replied. "You handed us over to the Regiment and—"

Eckhart tried not to listen and scanned the crowd. He knew almost everyone here, and the crew didn't attract nearly as much attention. A few of the gathered mercenaries shot quizzical glances at Clifton and DeWalt, but they were all so used to seeing Eckhart in here that no one approached.

He was just making up his mind to take off Rixby's backpack and go get himself a drink when someone pushed into the booth next to him. Or, to put it more accurately, she sat down on his lap. That was the only place available to sit with so many people already overflowing the booth.

A sinuous, boneless body of lithe, rippling muscle slithered over his left thigh. She wound powerful coils around his waist, and her lower limbs wrapped around his knee and cinched tight around his calf.

One arm encircled his waist and another draped around his neck. A beautiful female face with large, sloping black eyes, a too-small nose, and a curving rosebud mouth floated before his eyes. Her satin black hair swirled around her angular cheekbones in looping coils. Each lock undulated and adjusted its position like a live serpent.

"Good morning, Eckhart," she purred. "You just couldn't stay away, could you?"

He tensed when he first felt her wrapping herself around him, but as soon as he realized who it was, he willed himself to relax into her grip. Fighting her would only make her aggressive and deadly.

"I was just looking for you, Ilke." Her beauty automatically locked his whole attention on her hypnotic face, but he didn't want to look away, anyway. He didn't want her to think he was trying to evade her.

Alice groaned and rolled her empty eye sockets to the ceiling. "Not this again!"

Bing leaned closer and grinned like an idiot. "I can't wait to see

this!"

"I need a drink." Rixby scrambled out Eckhart's backpack and sprang down to the floor. She waddled off into the crowd and vanished, but Eckhart didn't see her. He didn't see anyone but the magical creature in front of him.

"Were you really looking for me, Eckhart?" Ilke purred. A delicate blush colored her cheeks. "You aren't just making that up?"

"Of course not. I was looking for you to ask you for your help."

Her coils tightened around him and a thread of adrenaline burned through his guts. That grip seized him with equal measures of excitement and danger. He had to watch his step around her.

"What possible help could I give you, Eckhart?" She lowered her voice to a deadly whisper. Her crimson mouth drifted too close to his, and her intoxicating presence made his head spin.

"You probably know about the Oksite and..." He inclined his head toward Clifton and DeWalt without taking his eyes off her. "Them."

"Everyone knows about them...and the Oksite, Eckhart. Everyone knows you destroyed the Regiment Station at Kukuri to free them."

"Then you probably know about the guys outside who want to recapture them." Of course she did.

Ilke broke eye contact with him and scanned the others at the table. Her muscular arm unwound from Eckhart's neck, slithered across the table, and started crawling up the thick Crionuim of Dallas's armored chest plate. "Hello, Dallas. Did you miss me?"

No one could read his expression through his helmet, but Dallas stiffened at her touch. "Of course I missed you, Ilke. You know I always miss you."

Alice snarled something under her breath, and Ilke smiled at her. "I'll tell you what, Eckhart. I'll help you for old time's sake...and for Dallas being such a gentleman." She withdrew her arm from Dallas's armor, but she didn't wrap it around Eckhart's neck again. She let it rest on the table, and her other limbs relaxed around Eckhart's body.

Relief flooded him. "Thank you, Ilke. I won't forget this."

She smiled even more seductively, and Bing chimed in. "So how are you going to help us? Are you going to kill those guys out there?"

"If I did, Vuldak would only send more of them to find you."

Alice slapped the tabletop. “So they did come from Vuldak! I thought so.”

Ilke only smiled at her, too, before she turned back to Eckhart. “Aistenz Trotaer is looking for you, Eckhart.”

Eckhart’s eyebrows shot up. “He is? Why?”

Ilke shrugged, that maddening smile playing on her rose-red lips. “I’m sure I don’t know. He doesn’t explain his reasons to me.”

Eckhart studied her even more closely. She’d cast her usual spell on him, but she no longer stopped him from thinking clearly now that her coils lay more lightly around his body. “So you spoke to him in person, did you? Is he here, on Zuic?”

“Of course. He has business here.”

“Business hiring you,” Alice grumbled.

“Me and my sisters,” Ilke replied.

“What sisters?” DeWalt blurted out, and immediately realized his mistake. He looked at the wall, but Ilke only smiled at him, too.

“She’s one of the Bloody Blossoms,” Dallas explained. “She’s Mozari.”

“So the Bloody Blossoms are working for Aistenz now,” Bing remarked. “Why am I not surprised?”

“Because we’re the best, Bing. Besides, we’re only working for him on this one job.” Ilke turned her gleaming black eyes back to Eckhart. “Unlike you, Eckhart.”

“What does that mean?” Clifton asked.

Eckhart ignored them and concentrated on Ilke. “So where is he? Where’s Aistenz Trotaer?”

She beamed at him and dipped her long eyelashes. “I can take you to him. That will ditch those guys out front.”

Eckhart tried to peer through the crowd. “We’ll have to find Rixby before we—”

“She’ll catch up. Don’t worry about her.”

“All right.” Eckhart took off his backpack and started to zip it closed.

“You aren’t going to leave without her, are you?” Clifton cut in. “You don’t really trust her, do you? She’s...a killer.”

Ilke burst into musical laughter. “The Mozari are incapable of lying,” Dallas explained. “She said she’d take us to Aistenz Trotaer, so she will.”

“And how do you know you can trust this Aistenz Trotaer?” Clifton asked. “How do you know he doesn’t want to cut our throats

just like everyone else on this planet?"

"Aistenz Trotaer doesn't want to harm Eckhart," Ilke replied in her silkiest voice. "Aistenz Trotaer loves Eckhart. It's only because of Aistenz's protection that you're all still alive at all."

"You said no one on this planet would harm us," DeWalt pointed out. "You said everyone here was too afraid of Aistenz Trotaer to raise a finger against Eckhart."

"Those guys outside aren't from here," Dallas told him.

"Weren't you listening?" Bing asked. "She said they were Vuldak's people."

"They don't answer to Aistenz any more than the Regiment does," Eckhart added. "Aistenz wouldn't be able to protect us from the Regiment, either."

That shut them up. Eckhart didn't want to talk about Aistenz Trotaer anymore. He didn't want to meet the guy again, either, but considering the alternatives, he didn't really have much choice.

He fished in his pockets and took out four of his remaining chips. He hated to part with them, but he'd rather do that than leave Zuic without supplies.

He made his way through the crowd and handed all four chips to the bartender before he walked outside. "What did you pay him for?" DeWalt asked. "We didn't order anything."

"When are you going to learn to stop asking so many questions?" Eckhart countered. "I think I know what to do with my own money."

"Eckhart always knows what to do with his money." Ilke appeared at his side and started wrapping her muscular limbs around him again, but he pulled away.

"How many of the Bloody Blossoms can we expect to meet when we get there?"

"None," she replied. "Aistenz conducts his business in the temple."

"How do you know where he's staying?" Alice demanded.

Ilke smiled at her with the same sultry seductive expression she bestowed on the men. "He told me where he's staying. He told me that if I ever saw Eckhart again, I should tell him where he could find Aistenz. He told me where he was staying on Zuic in case Eckhart showed up."

Alice grimaced again. "How convenient."

"Is Squids still Aistenz's major domo?" Eckhart asked.

“Of course,” Ilke lilted. “Squids will live forever. You know that.”

Eckhart nodded. He couldn’t help but notice that their tail had stationed agents on every street corner. They were everywhere. “Okay. Let’s go.”

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3

Ilke went ahead through the crowds on the streets. Eckhart and his crew followed as quickly as they could, but they had to stay focused just to keep up with her.

Her lower limbs rippled over the ground in a sidewinder motion, and her sinuous boneless body slipped between the thickest crowds. Even more than that, her elusive presence seemed to clear a path for her that no amount of force could accomplish.

The alien locals seemed to sense her long before she got near them. They magically parted to let her through. Eckhart found himself falling into a trance watching her movements, but DeWalt and Dallas's conversation brought him back.

"Do you know her?" DeWalt asked in a hushed murmur.

"It was a long time ago." Dallas sounded strange, his voice strained in a way Eckhart had never heard before.

"You said you missed her," DeWalt persisted. "Did you and Eckhart get into a fight over her or something?"

"Of course not." Dallas's tone changed to such a biting, derisive sneer that DeWalt shut up in a hurry. It was about time.

Eckhart came back to keeping pace with Ilke. She veered into another street and then down a set of stairs.

She entered an underground jewel market with hundreds of merchants lined up in rows. Trays of gems glistened in the light while buyers and sellers haggled and discussed prices, business, and politics affecting their trade.

Ilke shot Eckhart another smirk over her shoulder and ducked into a dark corner at the very back of the market. He followed her into a tiny closet with black curtains separating them from the market.

Alice, Bing, Clifton, and DeWalt squeezed in after him, but Dallas couldn't fit. "What are we doing in here?" Alice demanded.

Ilke checked through the curtains to make sure none of the merchants were watching. Then she pulled aside another heavy black drape to reveal an elevator hidden in the wall. She pressed the button. There was only one button, and the elevator didn't ding when it arrived.

She held it open while everyone entered—except Dallas. Dallas didn't turn around. He kept his back to them and faced outward toward the market. He only glanced back once, and he and Ilke shared a knowing look before she let the doors slide shut.

Eckhart had known for years that Dallas and Ilke had history together, but unlike DeWalt, Eckhart was too tactful to ask about it. Any dealings anyone had with the Mozari, especially the Bloody Blossoms, were better left in the past where they belonged.

The elevator didn't have any buttons on the inside, either. There was no way to tell it where the passengers wanted to go. As soon as the doors shut, the car dropped deep underground, and Eckhart's stomach leapt into his throat. It rode for a long, long way before it stopped.

Clifton and DeWalt exchanged glances, but neither asked any more questions, thank the stars. The doors opened, and Ilke swirled out into a large office full of aliens working at workstations.

They talked to other aliens on communications screens and entered and manipulated data on their computers. None of them looked sideways at the newcomers.

Ilke led the way between their desks to another elevator on the other side, but this time, when the crew entered and the doors closed, another door opened immediately on the other side.

It let them through to a beautifully appointed apartment full of comfortable furniture and a whole bunch of alien dignitaries dressed in expensive clothing. They lounged on couches while waiter aliens served them food and drink from trays.

A tall, thin alien of the same race as Alice met them at the door. The Bion straightened up at attention and looked down at Eckhart with his empty eye sockets. "Ah, Mr. Eckhart. I wondered when you would be rejoining us."

"How ya doing, Squids?" Eckhart shook hands with him. "I spend so much time around Alice that I sometimes forget Bions can be as friendly as everyone else."

Squids laughed in a husky rasp through his gas mask. "Aistenz will be delighted to hear that you've arrived. He's been anxious to find you for many years."

"Really? It shouldn't have been too hard for him to find me if he wanted me. I haven't exactly been in hiding, have I?"

Squids laughed again. "Unlike now, am I right?" He waved to the room. "Make yourselves at home. I'll inform him that you're

here."

Squids loped off and left the room. Clifton inched forward to Eckhart's side. "Are you seriously telling me you could have been living like this all this time, but you chose to get shot at on that trash heap of a ship of yours instead?"

"No one said he could have been living like this," Alice countered. "Aistenz might want to kill him."

"She just said Aistenz loves him." DeWalt waved toward Ilke. "She said Eckhart is under Aistenz's protection."

"Who cares? I'm hungry." Bing strolled into the room, grabbed a tall, frosty glass of bubbly from a passing waiter's tray, and flopped down on the couch right next to a corpulent Gorkas politician. Bing grinned at him and propped his lower limbs on the coffee table in an attitude of sublime relaxation. "How's it hangin', Your Worship?"

Alice surveyed what could only be described as a party. "I don't suppose these people have nutrient supplement here."

"Aistenz can get it for you," Ilke replied. "If he doesn't have it, he'll get it if Eckhart asks for it."

"Do you really not know why he wants to see me?" Eckhart asked.

She blushed and lowered her eyelashes in the most delightful way. "You know Aistenz as well as I do, Eckhart. He's been anxious to get you back ever since you left Parilia. He's always complaining about how he can't get good people, and he wishes he had you on his payroll."

Eckhart clenched his teeth. "If he thinks he can get me back on his payroll, he's sadly mistaken."

"Don't say that before you hear what he has to say," Alice cut in.

"If you really want to know my opinion," Ilke added, "I think he just wants to see you. He misses you."

Eckhart snorted. "Not likely."

Just then, a deep thunderous boom shook the apartment. Everyone sat up much straighter and Bing took his feet off the coffee table.

Squids returned, leading a giant insectoid alien on a long golden chain. The creature's head consisted almost exclusively of two enormous compound eyes that wrapped around its shiny armored head. A curved, pointed body extended downward from the head with ten tiny, almost nonexistent arms growing in pairs from its

sides.

Two wings bigger than the whole rest of it buzzed from its back, and the creature hovered three feet above the ground. It floated into the room, and Squids held onto its chain while the creature bobbed in front of Eckhart.

"I've waited a long time for this moment, Eckhart." Aistenz spoke in a soft, breathy hiss that came from somewhere near his neck. He didn't have any visible mouth.

Eckhart bowed his head. "Thank you for inviting me. I'm grateful for your protection."

"Is there nothing I can do to tempt you back into my service, Eckhart?" Aistenz murmured. "Nothing in the world that you want?"

Eckhart could think of a lot of things he wanted, but he was completely convinced that reentering Aistenz's service wasn't worth the trade-off.

"I can offer you so much more than protection," Aistenz went on. "I can offer you as much work as you could ever dream of. You and your crew would never want or fear from anyone ever again. I can remove your enemies with a wave of my hand."

He moved one of his insignificant limbs to make his point and Eckhart felt himself starting to cave.

"Vuldak's men followed him here," Ilke interjected. "The *Marathon* crew took refuge in the Titan Gulch."

Eckhart cringed, but he didn't argue with her. She wasn't telling Aistenz anything he didn't already know.

Aistenz hovered to one side and buzzed in front of Clifton and DeWalt. The two men gaped at Aistenz with their mouths open. "I can take these two off your hands. I can take the Oksite and leave you and your crew to go about your business. Is that what you want, Eckhart?"

Eckhart stiffened. There was nothing in the world he'd rather do than go back to the way things were before he'd blundered on these two passengers and their ill-fated Oksite crystal.

He couldn't accept Aistenz's offer at face value, though. "What would you do with them? I'll only hand over the crystal if I can be sure you won't pass it to someone who wants to use it."

"I never deal with the Regiment, if that's what you mean," Aistenz husked.

"What about Vuldak? What does he want with it?"

“You know Vuldak,” Ilke interrupted. “He only wants to sell it to the highest bidder.”

“If you can find a way to either get rid of the crystal or store it where no one will ever get to it,” Eckhart replied, “then I’ll reenter your service.”

“No!” Alice roared. “You can’t! Do you have any idea what he’ll do with you once he gets you back on his payroll?”

Aistenz faced her. “I never offered to take *you* into my service, my dear.”

“If you can find a way to prevent everyone from using the crystal, it will be worth it,” Eckhart interrupted. “But you have to prove to me that no one will ever use the crystal.”

“I *will* prove it to you,” Aistenz replied. “That will be a small price to pay.”

“What about these two?” Alice gestured to Clifton and DeWalt.

“Do you know why the Regiment wants them?” Eckhart asked.

“I don’t,” Aistenz rasped, “but the Bloody Blossoms do.”

Eckhart spun around and stared at Ilke. “You do?”

She dipped her eyelashes again and shrugged. “I might.”

“Why do they want us?” Clifton asked.

“Not you.” Ilke nodded at DeWalt. “Him.”

“Why do they want him?” Alice asked.

“Does it have something to do with his elevated body temperature?” Eckhart asked.

DeWalt’s eyes bugged. “I have an elevated body temperature?”

“The Trinity Code conglomerate infected you with a virus before you left Earth,” Ilke replied. “They want you to incubate it in your body until you bring back the Oksite. They plan to kill you and bury your body on the site where they intend to detonate their doomsday weapon. The virus will disperse through the alien races. It will kill anyone who survives the explosion.”

DeWalt’s jaw dropped. “How did they…? A virus—but how? I was in perfect health before I left Earth.”

She smiled more sweetly than ever. “You shared a drink with your father before you left Earth. He toasted your success and your safe return. He poured the drink for you.”

DeWalt staggered and would have fallen over if Clifton hadn’t supported him. Eckhart felt sick.

“If he’s infected with a virus, why haven’t the rest of us caught it yet?” Alice demanded. “We’ve been in close proximity with him

since he came on board the *Marathon*."

"It isn't contagious until he's dead. The virus is blood-borne. His body has to be vaporized and his blood aerosolized for the virus to spread to the widest possible population."

"How do you know so much?" Clifton spat. "How do you know what his father did before we left Earth?"

Ilke laughed at him. Her musical voice drifted through the party. "The Bloody Blossoms know all about *you*, too, Clifton. We know every detail of your sordid past."

Clifton turned red and looked away. DeWalt propped his hand against the wall to hold himself up.

"I have a job for you, Eckhart," Aistenz went on. "You can leave the Oksite crystal here with me. I will guarantee its safety until you return and, as a special favor to you, I will include destroying the crystal as part of your reward once the job is finished."

"No!" Alice snarled. "Don't listen to him, Eckhart. You can't trust him."

"But I trust *him*. That alone should tell you how serious I am." Aistenz turned to face Eckhart alone. "You have no idea how many pathetic excuses for mercenaries there are peddling their inferior skills around the galaxy, Eckhart. Good men, men who keep their word and do the job right—I have an exceptional need for men like you. You are the only free mercenary available that I trust—besides the Bloody Blossoms, of course."

"No!" Alice hissed. "If you go back to work for him, Eckhart, I'm gone. I won't be party to this."

Eckhart hesitated. He didn't want to lose Alice, but Aistenz's offer tempted him too much. He could get rid of the Oksite once and for all. Aistenz would no doubt pay him an exceptional reward for the job on top of that.

Aistenz offered unlimited work and all the protection Eckhart and his crew could ever want. Eckhart would never have to scrounge for work, or worry about some lowlife alien hoodlum trying to cheat or kill him to avoid paying.

Alice's hollow eyes bored into him from a few feet away. Eckhart became aware of Bing, Squids, Clifton, and DeWalt all watching. All their futures hung in the balance here.

Dallas and Rixby weren't here, but their fates depended on his decision right now, too. Would they object to Eckhart accepting Aistenz's offer?

“I’ll tell you what,” he finally replied. “I’ll do one job. I’ll work for you just until the crystal is destroyed. That’s all. Nothing more.”

Aistenz chuckled low, and his body wavered in midair. “One job always leads to another. Follow me, and we’ll put the crystal in a safe place. Then Squids and I will give you the details.”

He turned, and Squids led the giant insect across the room. Dignitaries and guests rose to their feet while he passed, and then they visibly wilted in relief once Aistenz left the room.

“What in the hell was *that*?” DeWalt whispered.

“Eckhart did a job for him once,” Alice replied.

“Just one?” Clifton asked. “He’s awfully attached to you.”

Eckhart shrugged the topic away. He didn’t want to talk about it. “It was an exceptional job, but it was a long time ago.”

Bing sidled over to join their group. “Are you sure you want to do this? Do you really trust him to keep his word?”

“Aistenz always keeps his word,” Ilke told him. “He’s a man of honor. That’s why he’s so disappointed with the mercenaries available to work for him.”

Eckhart turned to Alice. He couldn’t think about anything but her right now. “Go back to the *Marathon*. Wait for me there.”

She hunched her shoulders and stooped over more than usual when she walked away. An air of despondent, hopeless dread hung over her when she went through the elevator, back to the office, and out of sight.

Eckhart watched her go with a heavy heart, but Ilke brought him back to his senses. “You better catch up with him. You don’t want to keep him waiting.”

Eckhart handed his backpack full of Halfanite to Bing. “Stay here. Don’t leave until I come back.”

“What’s the matter?” Clifton asked. “Do you think he might pull a fast one?”

“I’m worried about you. If you leave, Aistenz won’t be able to protect you from whoever’s waiting outside.”

Eckhart crossed the apartment toward the door where Squids and Aistenz had disappeared, but he didn’t like leaving his people alone. He’d lost three crewmen in less than half an hour. Now only Bing, DeWalt, and Clifton remained. If this kept up, he would have no choice but to go back into Aistenz’s service, because he’d be totally alone.

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4

Eckhart stepped into a dim room glowing with red light. The light emanated from a large panel in one wall and the room contained no furniture. Squids and Aistenz stood in front of this glowing panel.

The panel popped out of the wall as Eckhart approached, and much brighter red light flowed out from a cavity inside the bedrock.

"The Oksite will be safe here until I can render your payment," Aistenz told him. "We can't risk it getting captured or destroyed while you're doing the job."

"What *is* the job?" Eckhart asked.

"We want you to hit the Silvercloud Vault," Squids replied.

Eckhart froze, and his eyes locked open so he couldn't even blink. His brain went into overdrive. He had to remind himself to think. His mind refused to believe he'd just heard those words.

"One of our people is locked up there—someone important to us," Aistenz went on. "We want you to break into the prison and free them. Bring them back to my safe house on Pheste and we'll settle your payment."

Eckhart rocked on his heels, taking this all in. Silvercloud Vault was the highest security prison in the sector.

It was hardly even a prison. It was more of a black hole where people went in and never came out. The place had such a formidable reputation that even information about it had a tendency to vanish if it got too close to the prison. Silvercloud Vault swallowed people, information, light, and awareness just like a black hole.

"You'll have access to all my resources, but only you, your crew, and the *Marathon* itself can approach the planet. If anyone finds out you're working for me, I'll deny any knowledge of your actions." Aistenz floated in front of Eckhart's face where Eckhart couldn't miss him. "If anyone can accomplish this task, I know you can."

Eckhart shivered at the compliment. He didn't want to be the one person Aistenz believed could get inside Silvercloud Vault, much less break out one of the prisoners and bring them back alive. This job was impossible. Forget about impossible. It was fantasy, pure and simple.

Squids held out a chip like the ones Eckhart used to receive payment and to pay for goods and supplies. “You’ll find everything you need on here, including access to a fully loaded bank account for your equipment, weapons, and any upgrades you want for the *Marathon*.”

Aistenz hovered nearer, and his wing brushed Eckhart’s shoulder. “If you accept this job, place the Oksite crystal inside my safe. I will guarantee its safety until you come back.”

Eckhart rotated the chip in his fingers and examined it on all sides. It didn’t look like anything exceptional, but it was.

Only Aistenz could throw down the gauntlet with an offer like this. He offered unlimited wealth, supplies, protection, and resources. In exchange, he asked the impossible.

Then again, people used to think Zels Ariat was untouchable. The regional Lord of the Immortals crime syndicate ruled the sector with an iron fist and no one could get rid of him... until Eckhart came along.

Eckhart had done more than just put Zels in the ground. He’d done it without anyone ever finding out who killed Zels. No one ever found who the assassin was working for, either.

No one found out that Aistenz was the one who put out a hit on Zels, and no one ever would. Eckhart planned to take that secret to his grave. Dallas had found out, and if Eckhart had his way, Dallas would be the last person who ever did.

A heavy silence fell over the room. Eckhart sensed Squids and Aistenz watching him. Everything that had happened before this moment and everything that happened afterward meant nothing.

Only this mattered. Whatever he decided to do right now would determine his fate and the fate of his crew from now on. Everything hinged on this moment.

He stuffed his other hand into his pocket and pulled out the crystal. He weighed it in one hand and the chip in the other.

The chip weighed almost nothing, but it was vastly more valuable than the crystal. That chip was the key to Aistenz’s empire —but only if Eckhart and his crew came back alive with the prisoner—whoever that was.

Eckhart never doubted for an instant that the crystal would be safe in Aistenz’s custody. Aistenz could do anything. Protecting the crystal should be easy for him.

No, it was the chip that gave Eckhart pause. If he accepted it, he

was accepting the yoke of Aistenz's service.

He might never accept another job from Aistenz. He could pretend to be a free man and go wherever he wanted to go, but everyone would know. Everywhere he went, people would treat him as Aistenz's man, and that's what he would be.

Even more so, Eckhart himself would know he was Aistenz's man. He would never really know if people treated him with respect because he earned it, or because they feared Aistenz.

Neither Aistenz nor Squids said anything. They didn't have to. Eckhart could stand here as long as he wanted, but in a way, he already knew he would do it.

He couldn't go back to running for his life with every man and his dog out to destroy him. He couldn't live like that, but he *would* live like that as long as he had this crystal.

He didn't let himself think about DeWalt or that he would still be running as long as he let DeWalt stay on the *Marathon*. Eckhart trusted Aistenz to get rid of the crystal, but DeWalt was a different story.

On the other hand, being under Aistenz's protection was the best way to keep DeWalt out of the wrong hands. Eckhart leaned forward and set the crystal on a glass shelf inside the cavity. He pulled back and the panel snapped shut.

The light dimmed and he let out a shaky sigh. He still held the chip in his other hand. The deal was done. Now came the hard part.

"Come over here, Eckhart. I want to show you something."

Eckhart turned away and followed Aistenz to the other side of the room. Aistenz opened another panel to reveal a computer screen. It displayed several visual feeds of the street outside, the jewel market, and a few other businesses elsewhere in the city.

Each feed showed various aliens lurking around, keeping the market under surveillance, or pretending to browse the goods on sale.

Eckhart frowned. "These are different people from before. Are they changing shifts?"

"They aren't changing shifts," Squids replied. "These aren't Vuldak's people."

"What do you mean?"

"Vuldak hired a bunch of Vrols to hunt you down, but they all vanished when these Kraknoid assassins showed up."

Eckhart spun around to stare at Squids. "Kraknoid! They work

for the Silent Death."

Aistenz did something to his equipment and the feeds changed again. They revealed a different group of aliens moving through alleys and back streets on the planet's surface.

"You can see the Ieri moving in. They will replace the Kraknoid. It appears all these groups are jockeying to position themselves to capture you when you go back out into the open."

Eckhart thought fast. "If that's true..."

"You'll have to dodge them to get yourself and your crew back to the *Marathon*. My influence won't protect you." Aistenz turned away again. "Follow me, Eckhart."

Eckhart stumbled after him and crammed the chip into the same pocket where he'd been carrying that damn crystal all this time. He couldn't lose that chip. It was his one lifeline in this mess.

His mind whirled while Aistenz led him down a long corridor past several lighted chambers. Others of Aistenz's species occupied about half of them, while other aliens served them, worked in offices, or performed the functions of Aistenz's empire.

Eckhart surveyed the terrain in his mind. Bing, Clifton, and DeWalt were safe as long as they stayed here, but he couldn't say the same for Rixby, Alice, and Dallas. Did Alice make it back to the *Marathon*, or did the enemy ambush her on the way?

Aistenz halted in a shadowy foyer with a long, gloomy tunnel leading out of it. It vanished into darkness several yards away.

"Wait here," he husked. "Your sidearms won't do you much good against the Ieri and the Kraknoid waiting for you. Take these."

Squids passed Eckhart several rocket launchers, and Eckhart took them gratefully. He didn't want to think about what awaited him outside, but it wouldn't be anything good.

Footsteps startled him into turning around, but it was only Bing, Ilke, Clifton, and DeWalt coming to join them. Bing hustled over to Eckhart's side and got busy preparing his own weapons for the coming fight.

Squids loaded Clifton and DeWalt with guns. Eckhart felt a rush of relief and gratitude that both men accepted the situation with calm certainty that they could handle whatever was about to happen.

Ilke eased over to Eckhart's side. "Stay close to me," she whispered. "If the Sisterhood sees you behind me, they'll assume you're under my protection and they won't try to kill you."

Eckhart nodded and caught Bing listening in. Clifton and DeWalt heard her, too, but they obviously didn't understand.

The Sisterhood. Aistenz had come to Zuic to hire the Bloody Blossoms. They weren't here now, but they would be soon. Everybody better watch out when they arrived.

Aistenz rasped in a gravelly undertone: "Now."

Squids swung his giant pounder onto his shoulder, raised his bony arms, and unclipped the chain connected to Aistenz's neck. Aistenz shot away down the dark tunnel, and Squids broke into a dead run to keep up with Aistenz.

Eckhart shoved Clifton and DeWalt forward, but Aistenz was already almost out of sight. He moved so unbelievably fast that only the buzz of his wings told Eckhart where he was.

Ilke and Bing dropped back to guard their rear, and Eckhart tightened his grip on his weapons. Any second now...

Squids veered sideways, and the whole party burst out onto the open street in a completely different part of town. Aistenz rocketed forward at incredible speed and plunged into the crowd. In a split second, Eckhart lost sight of him, but that hardly mattered now.

Squids slowed to fight his way through the crowds, and Eckhart pushed Clifton and DeWalt into Squids' wake, but they couldn't move fast enough with so many people in the way.

Bing shouted something and Eckhart glanced behind him, dreading what he would see. He caught a fleeting glimpse of at least a dozen different aliens converging on their position. They weren't Vrols or Kraknoid or Ieri or any of the groups that Aistenz mentioned.

Eckhart had a split second to dive behind Clifton and DeWalt before all hell broke loose. Their pursuers tore out of the crowd to surround the fleeing group.

Half a dozen weapons swung up to point at the fugitives. Bing whirled around, brandishing a pounder in each hand, but he never got a shot off.

A blood-curdling shriek pealed over the crowd and Ilke shot off the ground in a flying leap. She vaulted high over Eckhart's head and exploded in a blinding flurry of movement. All her sinuous limbs spread out in a ball of writhing tentacles, whipping in all directions at once.

Each appendage erupted in sprays of lasers that showered the street in destruction. Her arms wavered around her in a blurred

sphere of lasers spraying outward. Her hair flew out in a halo around her head, with lasers spitting from every strand.

Her face transformed into a gruesome contorted smear of black, red, and flashing light. Her eyes became two pits of smoldering black, and another lashing flail snaked out of her mouth.

She tumbled and twisted and seethed in a compact black torrent, with lasers stuttering from every surface. Bodies toppled all around her, but that wasn't the most fearsome part of the battle.

The moment she struck, at least thirty identical black balls of spinning death dropped from directly overhead. They plunged for the skyscrapers and catapulted into the crowd, carpeting the street with lasers and dismembered bodies.

Clifton and DeWalt lunged away from them, trying to fight their way to reach Squids, but Eckhart grabbed them and hauled them back. "No! We have to stay near Ilke."

Clifton didn't hear him. He panicked and struggled to break free. "Are you insane? She'll kill us. Look at her!"

Eckhart hauled off and punched DeWalt hard in the nose. "Wake up! Get over here—now!"

Clifton staggered and Eckhart grabbed his sleeve. He hauled both men right up behind Ilke.

Bing swiveled behind them and fired into the crowd. Eckhart couldn't see what Bing was shooting at, but the Bloody Blossoms posed as much of a threat to them right now as any of the other groups hunting them.

Eckhart forced Clifton and DeWalt toward Ilke's lasers. He didn't recognize any part of her anymore, but as the men got closer, the lasers facing them changed. They twisted sideways to fire around them. Her tentacles parted and snaked around them. She surrounded the men with her limbs and fired outward to protect them.

Eckhart scanned the crowd and spotted commotion several dozen yards ahead. He took a chance and plunged his arm inside Ilke's many firing limbs. He pulled her toward the confusion.

She complied and backed away, leaving her sisters fighting their unseen attackers. Gunfire exploded in Eckhart's ears, but they couldn't stay here. They had to make it back to the *Marathon* at all costs.

The crowd scattered as Ilke got nearer. Only the attackers remained. Dozens of different aliens lined the sidewalks, fighting

their way closer to the fleeing friends.

“Get ready to fight our way through!” Eckhart yelled to Clifton and DeWalt.

The men turned their weapons outward, and Bing backed into Eckhart. They were still inside Ilke’s protection, but Eckhart had a bad feeling about this.

They moved farther away from the Bloody Blossoms. The Sisterhood stayed where they were, fighting dozens of attackers. They either didn’t notice Ilke taking the fugitives away, or the Bloody Blossoms were too pinned down to move.

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5

Eckhart checked his position. He and his friends were miles away from where they'd left the *Marathon*. Hundreds of gunmen assembled from all over to annihilate the crew. If this kept up, they would need an act of God to get off this planet.

He stuck his gun between Ilke's appendages and added his fire to hers. Clifton, DeWalt, and Bing left the sidewalks littered with bodies, but it still wasn't enough. All these assassins worked together to kill the friends.

Eckhart looked around for Squids and Aistenz when, out of nowhere, a missile screamed down from above and hammered into the pavement right next to Bing. Concrete rubble sprayed him in the face and he shrank back into the cluster.

Eckhart whipped his gun upward and immediately ducked as five more rockets pounded into the street all around him. "Run!" he ordered.

He grabbed Ilke, but there was nowhere to run besides into the path of more guns. Ilke couldn't keep up with all of them on her own.

Eckhart herded his friends deeper into the city when he heard it. Another incoming missile shrieked out of the sky, but this one had a different sound. He looked up and the world stood still.

The rocket dropped directly over them. It headed straight for them. Three of Ilke's limbs whipped upward and bombarded the rocket with lasers, but nothing could stop it.

Eckhart lunged for Clifton and DeWalt and shoved them out of the way, but he couldn't move fast enough to get away himself. He felt Ilke wrap her powerful, muscular arms around him, but not even she could save him. Everything went still and quiet as all the air sucked out of the world.

The battle slowed to a standstill before his eyes when, at the moment before the rocket pulverized him to death, Aistenz whirled in front of him and a deep, bone-shaking thump deafened Eckhart. A pulse pulled Eckhart's skin away from his bones and the rocket smashed into the force field.

It shattered on Aistenz's pulse, and the explosion rippled

outward to crack buildings lining the street. Several gunmen toppled, but the bombardment didn't stop. More missiles dropped out of the sky, and even more whistled up the street from guns hidden out of sight.

Aistenz's wings buzzed in a blinding whirr. He turned one way and then the other, releasing pulses from each of his puny arms. They erupted from his eyes, and even from the joints of his insectoid body.

Rockets detonated on the field he threw over the fugitives. Squids appeared out of the mayhem and pulled Eckhart away. "We have to move!"

The group started winding through the city streets, again with Aistenz carving a path to protect them. They turned a few corners. The hordes of attackers thinned and then, another five blocks away, they reconvened to mount another concerted assault.

Aistenz led them through another intersection, and Eckhart's heart leapt when he spotted the Forsaken Pyramid ahead—but only for a second.

A bunch of Ieri streamed out of a nearby building, wheeling pounders onto the sidewalk. They opened fire and Aistenz wheeled into their path to protect the friends.

"Get to your ship and bring back my prisoner!" he rasped in his deadly undertone. "Everything depends on that."

Eckhart turned to relay the order to Bing, Clifton, and DeWalt. At that moment, a rocket corkscrewed out of another building behind the friends. It came from a pile of bodies left by Ilke's lasers. Eckhart didn't need to see the shooter.

He had only his rifle to save his friends, but before he could fire, Ilke streaked into his path. She flung herself at him, and all her limbs surrounded him in a crushing grip.

The rocket struck her at the very epicenter of all her flailing limbs, and the impact flattened Eckhart with her still hanging onto him with all her massive strength.

He fell hard, and her weight landed on top of him. Her arms locked. He couldn't free himself.

Bing sprang over to him and knelt down next to Eckhart. Bing dropped one of his guns and scrambled to unwind Ilke from Eckhart while he tried to defend the group at the same time.

Eckhart pried his head off the pavement and spotted a bunch of Kraknoid assassins moving into position behind Bing's back. Bing,

Clifton, and DeWalt were too busy driving off Vuldak's Vrols while Aistenz protected everyone from the Ieri's pounders.

Eckhart raised his rifle an inch off the ground. He could move his wrist and nothing else. He fired under Bing's arms and made the Kraknoids retreat, but this couldn't go on. No one could advance under such heavy fire.

Deep rumbling quakes shook the ground under Eckhart's body. He looked around for more rockets threatening to wipe out the group. The vibrations got louder. They felt more like the steady drumming of footsteps than random rocket fire.

The Kraknoids rushed into the street to overrun the friends. Bing abandoned Ilke, snatched his second weapon, and turned outward to shoot, but the Kraknoids never reached them.

Eckhart fought against Ilke's grip to raise his own weapon. The drumming thumps got louder. The Kraknoids whirled as one to face their right as a huge silver giant stalked into the street. Dallas rotated his assault guns in all directions, cutting down the Kraknoids by the dozen.

The Ieri spun their pounders to aim at him. The guns erupted and five rockets smashed into Dallas's chest, but he kept advancing. He marched up the street, drawing all their fire.

Bing whirled back to Eckhart and went to work on Ilke's arms. He pried them off and Eckhart leapt to his feet. Dallas stomped over and turned backward to straddle Ilke's sprawled body.

The friends closed into a protective knot. Dallas scooped up Ilke in one giant mechanical arm and the group started off again toward the Forsaken Pyramid.

They made it as far as the block in front of the Pyramid before the Bloody Blossoms returned. They soared out of the night sky and plummeted into the street to surround the party.

"Get to your ship!" Aistenz ordered. "We'll protect your retreat."

Eckhart steered his friends toward the elevator to the roof. Aistenz, Squids, and the Bloody Blossoms positioned themselves around the friends, and the attackers started to fall back. Eckhart didn't envy them their fate when the assassins realized that their quarry was gone and they'd wound up alone with Aistenz.

Bing ran over to the elevator and hit the button, but it took a long time for the car to arrive. The assassins retreated farther away and the Bloody Blossoms stopped firing. They returned to their normal appearance as beautiful, enchanting women, each one as

alluring as Ilke, but the quiet didn't put Eckhart at ease.

He glanced behind him to check how far away the elevator car was when, without warning, a jet of plasma smashed into the pyramid. The stone edifice exploded and debris ruptured from its surface.

Eckhart whipped the other way. He and Dallas fired outward to guard their friends as a dozen Aegean fighter craft screamed up the street. They rotated sideways to slot through buildings and lambasted the Pyramid with dozens of shots.

Clifton, DeWalt, and Bing sprang forward to join their gunfire with Eckhart's. The Bloody Blossoms fired all their lasers, but they couldn't hit such fast-moving fighter craft.

"Why are they shooting at us?" DeWalt shrieked over the noise. "You said anything goes on the ground."

"The Aegeans are a crime syndicate like all the rest. They don't have to follow their own rules," Dallas told him. "Just shoot."

"Where is that damn elevator?" Bing roared.

The Aegeans ran overhead in a steady stream of engine noise and sizzling plasma. They rushed the pyramid in a steady, unbroken line of ships and took turns shooting at the party on the ground.

Aistenz took several shots on his protective fields, but after twenty or thirty punishing blows, he staggered and his power started to fail.

Eckhart dropped on one knee and checked his weapons to make his last stand. He shouldered his rifle and aimed at the next Aegean vessel charging in to blow the friends away.

Three fighter craft dropped between the buildings. They rocketed in for their next bombing run when another ship plunged over the Forsaken Pyramid. It dove directly over Eckhart's head.

He jerked up his rifle to take aim and barely pulled his finger off the trigger in time as the *Marathon* whooshed past him and barreled into the enemy at top speed.

Datrium erupted from the ship's guns, spraying the incoming fighter craft. The Aegeans staggered under the barrage, but not for long.

The Aegean contingent rallied. They veered off course and raced back in droves. They surrounded the *Marathon* and split their formation. One group drove the *Marathon* high into the atmosphere, while the rest continued their assault on the pyramid.

Gunfire and plasma bursts boomed through the pyramid and

almost completely drowned out the faint ding of the elevator arriving. Eckhart backed up and bumped Clifton and DeWalt into the car, but Bing got there first.

"Leave it, Dallas!" Eckhart yelled. "Come on!"

Dallas kept firing his assault guns upward at the Aegeans. The fighter craft looped high through the atmosphere, plunged, and shrieked back to hammer the pyramid with more shots. A few jets of plasma ricocheted off Dallas's armor, and he staggered toward the elevator.

Eckhart grabbed him and hauled Dallas the rest of the way into the car. Dallas had to duck to get inside it and crashed onto his knees, still shooting through the open door.

Eckhart turned to the control panel to shut the door...and stopped in his tracks. Rixby's antennae wavered at him, but she didn't turn away from the control panel. She tinkered with it in a flurry of activity. How the hell did she get here?

Eckhart opened his mouth to ask when another jet of plasma slammed into the pyramid. It struck the elevator's outer rim, and blocks dislodged around it. They crashed to the ground in a sheet of dust.

"Get us out of here, Rixby!" he bellowed. "Shut the door!"

"I'm trying! It won't shut." She went into another rapid attempt to do something to the control panel. "Wait a moment. I'm—"

Another shot soared right through the door and struck Dallas in the face. He toppled and squashed Clifton and DeWalt under his heavy armor, but he never lost his hold on Ilke.

"Rixby!" Eckhart hollered.

She didn't respond, working over the panel in a fever. Eckhart couldn't wait any longer. He charged over and almost tore her away from the panel when a strange sound drew his attention to the battle raging outside.

More Aegean fighter craft howled into view. They wove in and out of buildings, making another pass at the Forsaken Pyramid. The Bloody Blossoms stood their ground in front of their temple, but all the lasers in the world couldn't hit those ships.

The fighter craft shrieked into view, aiming their plasma shots at the elevator. How much more could the building take? Had the Aegeans already destroyed the *Marathon*, along with every other ship on the roof?

They thundered into view and angled downward to unload on

the pyramid when their engine noise changed. It spiked into a screech and then started to dwindle.

The fighter craft hovered a hundred feet off the ground, tilted, and started to drop. They crashed down on the paved street.

Eckhart stared down the long channel of space between the skyscrapers. Fighter craft fell out of the sky and bounced on the pavement. People huddled in doorways for protection as dozens of ships stalled in midair and then crashed to the ground, inoperable.

“All set!” Rixby chirped. The doors slid shut and cut off Eckhart’s stunned view of the scene.

“What did you do, Rixby?” Bing quavered.

“Just a little something. I couldn’t get the door shut, so I decided to do something else.” Her antennae rotated in Eckhart’s direction. “We can go now. No one will stop us.”

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6

The elevator doors slid open on the roof of the Forsaken Pyramid. Eckhart, Dallas, Bing, Clifton, and DeWalt all swept the deserted ships with their guns before anyone dared to go outside, but no one came after them here.

Dallas glanced down at Ilke's pallid face. She looked like she was asleep. "We have to get her to the infirmary. She's losing blood."

Bing dropped his rifle against its strap and tugged on one of Ilke's flopping appendages. "Bring her down here."

Dallas lowered Ilke so Bing could bend over her. He pulled her mouth open and spat a mouthful of Eplite down her throat. "That should hold her until we can get off this deathtrap of a planet."

Eckhart stepped out of the elevator and turned his rifle from right to left and back again. Clifton copied him.

"It's all clear," Eckhart announced. "Let's move it."

"Where are we going?" DeWalt asked. "The *Marathon* isn't here."

The ship's engines answered him. It wheeled out of the night sky and descended on top of the roof. It swiveled backward, and the rear hatch opened to let them in.

The crew ran on board. The ship whizzed off the roof and vaulted into the atmosphere even before the hatch fully closed.

Dallas transferred Ilke to Bing's arms, and Bing headed off to the infirmary with her. Rixby crossed to the makeshift workstation the crew had set up in the cargo hold.

"What the hell just happened?" DeWalt demanded.

"You heard what Aistenz said," Eckhart told him. "All the bastards who've been hunting for you finally caught up with us."

"You said you were under his protection," DeWalt countered. "How do you explain so many people trying to kill us? He even turned the Aegeans against us."

"Aistenz didn't turn anyone against us," Dallas explained. "All those assassins came from off the planet. Aistenz can't protect us from everybody. If he hadn't been trying to protect Eckhart, we would have been dead the minute we set foot on the planet. Why do you think the Vrols held off and followed us to the Titan Gulch?

They were afraid to attack right under Aistenz's nose."

Clifton and DeWalt glanced over at Eckhart. "Is that true?" DeWalt asked.

"It doesn't matter. We're free of the Oksite."

"Not exactly," Rixby pointed out. "It's still down there. If you don't go through with this job, you don't know what Aistenz will do with it."

"Aistenz will keep his word," Eckhart replied. "If I don't finish the job, he'll give it back to me—which is exactly what we *don't* want."

"If he has the Oksite," Clifton asked, "why did so many people try to kill us?'

Eckhart turned to DeWalt. "Because you're still here. We just have to figure out what to do with you."

"He's a danger to all of us as long as he's on this ship," Dallas pointed out.

"He's a danger to the whole galaxy if he's *off* the ship." Eckhart turned away. "Stay down here. Rixby, I want you to work on this workstation until I tell you otherwise. Understand?"

"Certainly," she chirped.

"Hey!" DeWalt called after him. "Where are you going?"

"There's something I need to do."

Eckhart climbed the stairs to the bridge, but before he entered it, he glanced through the porthole. Alice sat at her usual station, but she wasn't doing anything to work on the ship. She must have laid a course, and now she let the ship fly itself.

She reclined in her seat with her feet up on the console. She gazed at the front screen with her head turned away from Eckhart. He couldn't see her face—not that he would be able to read her expression if he could.

He walked in and sat down in his own seat. He pulled his control panel toward him and started working on the controls without looking at Alice.

The first thing he did was to lock the bridge door so none of the others could interrupt. Then he went through a few readings from Zuic.

The *Marathon* had left the planet a dozen light years behind, and now the ship hurtled away at a smart pace, but he could still read activity in the planet's atmosphere.

The Aegeans overcame whatever malfunction Rixby had

inflicted on them. They got their fighter craft back in the air, but the *Marathon* was long gone.

He pulled out Aistenz's chip and slotted it into the regulators. It brought up thousands of documents, architectural plans of the Silvercloud Vault, and a bunch of personnel files on some of Aistenz's long-time mercenary assets.

The longer Eckhart spent studying the prison's layout, the more impossible the job appeared. The prison was located on Laloyama, a volcanic planet with a surface entirely covered by molten lava. Surface temperatures hovered in the 3,000-4,000K range on a nice day.

The prison itself was located miles beneath the surface. It had been carved out of the remains of an ancient glacier. Frozen Acine vapors made it impervious to the high temperatures radiating downward from the surface.

The plans Aistenz gave Eckhart showed only two entry and exit points. The first was about five and a half miles beneath the lava flow. Supply and prisoner transport ships needed shielding a thousand times more powerful than Celdian to protect them when they passed through the lava and entered the prison itself.

The second entrance was through one of the many active volcanoes on the surface. Mount Graelges regularly spouted more lava in giant fountains that replenished the surrounding lava ocean.

The entry point to the prison opened about ten miles down the mountain's main funnel. Air temperatures reached a scorching 7,000K, and ships had to time their maneuvers exactly or risk getting fried by another eruption.

Eckhart frowned at the information on the chip. How in the holy hell was he supposed to get inside the place?

"What are you looking at?" Alice barked, and startled Eckhart into turning around.

She glared at him across the bridge, and he immediately turned away. "Nothing."

She swung her legs off her workstation and stabbed her spindly fingers at her controls. "What the hell is this?"

"It's the job Aistenz wants me to do, but it doesn't concern you. You aren't coming with us."

She sat very still with her back to him, and he could just hear the penny drop when she transferred the information from his console over to her own workstation.

He watched her crooked, bony shoulders. She didn't turn around.

What would she say about what he planned to do? She was so adamant on Zuic that she wouldn't help him do any job for Aistenz. He couldn't exactly blame her, especially now that he saw what the job was.

He didn't want to lose her, but he also didn't want to compel her to do something she felt so strongly about not doing. He hated to think of even approaching the Silvercloud Vault without her, but this was her choice. He couldn't make it for her.

She turned around a lot more slowly than he expected. He braced himself for her to unload on him in a tirade of curses, or maybe insults against his intelligence for even considering this job. He expected her to storm out and leave the ship immediately.

Instead, she rotated her hollow eye sockets in his direction. Her raspy breath wheezed through her mask. She studied him with unnerving intensity and he shrank under her gaze.

He'd gotten what he wanted and escaped from Parilia by doing one job for Aistenz. He'd promised himself it would be the last job he ever did for Aistenz and he'd spent his career since doing everything possible to avoid going back into Aistenz's service.

Eckhart had known for years that he could get unlimited work at exorbitant pay if he just swallowed his pride and went to work for Aistenz full-time. He didn't want to do that, though, and he surrounded himself with a crew that didn't want it, either.

Alice remained silent for so long that he started to worry. Had she lost all respect for him for even speaking to Aistenz? Eckhart wouldn't be surprised if she did.

"So," she finally snapped. "How do you plan to get in?"

Eckhart shrugged. "No idea."

She continued to stare at him without shifting her gaze once. "I told you I wouldn't participate in this."

"I know. You don't have to." He turned his gaze away and checked the navigation range. "We can drop you off at Stolxo if you want."

She faced forward and stared straight ahead for a while without answering. What was she thinking right now? He couldn't bring himself to hope she would change her mind.

He glanced down at the prison layout again, but it only depressed him. He switched over to the personnel files. "You didn't

have to stay with me as long as you did," he mused. "I'm grateful for the help you've given me all these years. You didn't have to do that."

"Yes," she growled. "I did."

"You could have gone back to your people. Stolxo has a sizeable Bion population. All the other Bion from Vazin went there."

"I don't give a shit what the other Bion from Vazin did," she spat. "I'm not them."

"I know that," he began. "I'm just saying you didn't have to stay on board the *Marathon* as long as you did. You could have had a life."

"I *have* a life."

He snorted. "Some life. You gave up a lot for me, and I appreciate it. I don't know what we would have done without you all these years."

She turned back around to stare at him, and he plunged ahead. He'd gotten this far. He might as well finish it.

"If you stayed to repay me for getting you out of Vazin, you paid that debt a long time ago. If you stay, I want you to do it because you want to, not out of some sense of debt to me. That's all I'm saying."

"I didn't stay out of any sense of debt." She looked away again. "Did you think I was one of those boot-licking Bion who would follow you around like a puppy?"

"No, I just thought—"

"You thought I felt I had to repay you for getting me off Vazin."

"Well, I just thought—"

"The Black Platoon recruited half the Bion on Vazin to do their bidding and help them in their campaign to overthrow the Regiment. Did you know that?"

Eckhart swallowed to get his throat working. His nerves stretched to the breaking point listening to her. She never talked about what happened on Vazin—not ever. "I…I didn't know that."

She faced the front screen and muttered under her breath like she was talking to herself. "The Black Platoon rewarded these collaborators with promises. They told these Bion that they could escape the worst fates once the Black Platoon drove the Regiment out of the sector.

"The collaborators received food and comforts in exchange for keeping the rest of us prisoners beaten down and demoralized. I

hated them. I hated them almost as much as the Earthlings who captured us. I hated all Earthlings, but I hated those cringing boot-licking Bion more."

She turned around even more slowly, and her breath sounded extra loud coming through her mask. "And then you came. I thought you would wipe us all out."

"I was supposed to. That was the job—to wipe out not just the Black Platoon, but everyone in the compound. The client didn't want any witnesses left alive."

"You freed *all* the aliens in the compound, not just the Bion. You even freed the collaborators."

"What was I supposed to do—hold trials to decide who was worthy of a death sentence and who should go free? There wasn't time for that."

"You're a fool, Eckhart," she rasped. "You care too much. That's your fatal flaw. You put your whole crew at risk by keeping DeWalt on board, but you'd rather stand up to every criminal syndicate in the galaxy than give him up."

He looked down at the regulators and started flipping through Aistenz's personnel files, but he only half looked at them. "It isn't just DeWalt, is it? If the Regiment gets their hands on him or the crystal, they'll use both against the aliens on the fringes. They'll wipe out millions—maybe even billions."

"Why did you let me stay on board your ship?" she demanded. "Was I another charity case like DeWalt?"

"Charity case! How can you even ask me that? You've done more for me than you ever got paid for—more than *I* ever did for *you*. Hell, I can't believe we're having this conversation."

He did his best to concentrate on the files, but he couldn't stop fuming. If she wanted to leave, let her leave. She didn't have to drag up the past or insult his decisions. Keeping DeWalt and the crystal out of Regiment hands had nothing to do with charity or Eckhart caring too much.

She fell silent again, and he let the files occupy his attention. He got so absorbed in them that he almost forgot she was there.

He knew a little less than half the people on the chip. He just didn't know they worked for Aistenz, though he shouldn't have been surprised.

Aistenz had at least a third of the Bloody Blossoms on his payroll, including the Grand Mother of their order. He also had

moles in most of the major criminal organizations controlling black market traffic on the fringes.

Not surprisingly, Aistenz's influence dwindled the closer he encroached on Regiment-controlled space. An alien couldn't extend his power base into Earth's domain.

For some reason Eckhart couldn't figure out, Aistenz's files didn't explicitly state which of these assets he wanted Eckhart to free from the Silvercloud Vault. The chip contained five hundred personnel files, but none of them contained any special marker or flag to show which of them was Eckhart's target.

He flipped through a few more. He passed Namol, a Hilkut assassin from the Thilte system, but the target couldn't be him. Namol was working as a bodyguard to Fomfron, the warlord who controlled Ziqin and its system of moons.

The next document covered Ognu, a black marketeer from the Doncil satellite of the planet Krov. Ognu couldn't possibly be the target. He employed a vast network of intermediaries precisely so he never had to stick his neck out far enough to risk getting caught.

Then came Dickat Norheall, a big-shot weapons dealer from the Ingrins system. He worked for the Vagill brothers and Dickat was far too valuable to them. Even if, by some outside chance Dickat got caught—which he wouldn't—the Vagill brothers would never let him go to prison.

He turned to the next document, not expecting to find anything particularly interesting. His mind started to wander. He never expected the last three entries to work for Aistenz. Come to think of it, they *didn't* work for him. They never had and they never would, so why did Aistenz include them here?

Aistenz must have seeded this chip with hundreds of dummy files to mask the one file he wanted Eckhart to find. Only one of these was the real target…but which one?

He almost left the bridge. He shook those thoughts out of his head and raised his hand to eject the chip when he saw the file in front of him. The name sent a prickle up his scalp.

Akkek Stratha. An almost human face stared back at him from his console, but Akkek wasn't human. She was an Akeix safe breaker from the planet Shisax, but the Regiment had destroyed Shisax generations ago.

The surviving Akeix scattered and disappeared into the teeming hordes of alien populations on the fringes. They blended in and

became something close to legend among criminals.

Now Eckhart understood why Aistenz was so tight-lipped about who his target was. No wonder he'd hidden her identity among so many other personnel files on the chip.

Unlike all the other files, Akkek's details came from the Regiment itself. Regiment records going back at least fifty years listed bank robberies, art thefts, jewel heists, and high-risk raids on some of the most dangerous criminal elements on the fringes.

Akkek had even been known to infiltrate the Silent Death and come back alive to tell the tale—but she never told the tale. That was her greatest quality.

She'd been caught a total of ten times. She'd been incarcerated in the highest-security prisons in the galaxy. Not only did she never once tell who she'd been working for, but she escaped imprisonment every time.

The Regiment had transferred her to higher and higher security holding facilities every time she got captured. The last time she got caught, she had broken into a burial crypt belonging to the Immortals, a black-market syndicate on Uriax.

Akkek had lifted a collection of priceless jewelry from the tomb of one Omhar the Liar. The Immortals had conveniently been supplying information to the Regiment about a renegade population of Zainids, but even if they hadn't been, the Regiment had already been burned too many times by Akkek's exploits.

They'd tracked her down, and with the help of a few of their other two-faced contacts on the fringes, they captured Akkek and shipped her off to the Silvercloud Vault.

There were two unusual circumstances about her capture. One was the fact that they captured her at all. They shouldn't have been able to find her, because the Shisax were notorious for disappearing, blending into crowds, and erasing their existence.

Some speculated that Akkek let herself get caught just to humiliate the Regiment by escaping from them. She hadn't been able to escape from the Silvercloud Vault, but maybe she just hadn't been trying all that hard.

No, the really bizarre thing was that the jewelry was never recovered. It never turned up on the black market and, despite many criminal organizations offering stupendous rewards for it, it never resurfaced.

Needless to say, the Immortals were furious that some refugee

from the ass end of the galaxy ripped off their glorious leader. They offered even higher bounties on Akkek's life, but since she was all locked up in the Silvercloud Vault, no assassin could reach her.

Eckhart frowned at the file. He didn't need to read it to know every detail of Akkek's story. She was famous on the fringes. Mercenaries, assassins, merchants, thieves, and traders whispered her name with reverence in smoky bars and dingy alleys—anywhere the Regiment couldn't hear.

A bomb went off in Eckhart's mind and he shot out of his chair. "This is it! This is the contract!"

Alice jumped in surprise. "What? Who is?"

Eckhart wasn't listening. He unlocked the door and ran to the stairs. He stuck his head down and yelled, "Get up to the bridge, all of you! We've got work to do."

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PART 2

ONE LAST JOB

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7

Bing rubbed his head and clamped his eyes shut. “Let me get this straight. You want to break into the Silvercloud Vault.”

“To get Akkek Stratha out of there and bring her back to Aistenz,” Dallas finished.

“That’s right,” Eckhart replied. “In exchange, he’ll destroy the Oksite for us so we don’t have to worry about it falling into the wrong hands. We also won’t have to worry about anyone coming after us and trying to kill us for it.”

Clifton glanced over at DeWalt, but he was the only one who did.

“Why doesn’t Aistenz just fire the Oksite into the lava on Laloyama?” Bing asked. “That would get rid of it, along with the Silvercloud Vault. That would shut Akkek Stratha up real good.”

“No one can kill Akkek Stratha,” Dallas murmured. “She’s untouchable.”

“Killing Akkek isn’t the job,” Eckhart reminded them. “The job is getting her out of the prison and back to Aistenz’s safehouse on Pheste. If he wanted Akkek dead, he would have found a way to do it by now.”

“By that logic, if he wanted Akkek freed from the prison, he would have found a way to do that, too,” Bing argued. “Why did he have to hire us to do it?”

“Does it matter?” Alice spoke up for the first time from the back corner of the infirmary. “We’re doing it. Why doesn’t matter.”

No one asked the obvious question of why she’d changed her mind about joining them on this suicide mission. Eckhart didn’t ask, either. He was too glad to have her with him. They needed every able crew member they could get.

“But how?” Clifton asked. “The Silvercloud Vault…I mean, it’s impenetrable.”

“Not really,” Eckhart replied. “There are two entrances, and there are ships going in and out all the time.”

“Ships with enhanced heat shielding we don’t have,” Dallas added.

“Ships with clearance codes,” Bing finished.

“Ships with experience,” Alice chimed in. “Ships who have been in and out many times before and can time their entry into Mount Graelges.”

“We can get all that information,” Eckhart told them. “Aistenz’s chip contains timing information on how to get inside the mountain.”

“Without frying our asses off,” Bing finished for him.

“Aistenz also said we could use his bank accounts to get any modifications we needed. We can buy the shielding to get through the lava.”

“Forget about breaking in by force,” Dallas countered. “It can’t be done with any kind of weapons. You’d blow the whole planet breaking through the glacier.”

“I don’t plan to break in by force,” Eckhart replied. “I just said we could time Mount Graelges, and we can buy the shielding to get through the lava.”

“And then what?” Alice asked. “The prison is armed with some of the most powerful guns in the galaxy. There are motion sensors in every corridor and DNA detectors linked to the genetic trace of every prisoner inside its walls. Every cell is armed with weight detectors linked to the prison’s mainframe. If any prisoner leaves their cell without authorization, it triggers an alarm and locks down the whole prison.”

Eckhart nodded. “I know all that.”

“So what’s your plan?” Clifton asked. “How do you plan to get inside?”

Eckhart opened his mouth, but before he could speak, Ilke moaned on the exam table. She’d been unconscious since she’d saved Eckhart’s life on Zuic.

Dallas stomped over to the table and slipped his metal fingers around one of her arms. Eckhart averted his gaze, and the others retreated from the infirmary.

They filed out, and Eckhart turned his steps back to the bridge, but when he reached the threshold, he looked back. Dallas raised Ilke’s arm to his helmet in a kissing motion. Ilke smiled up at him, but she was still too weak to stand.

Eckhart tore himself away and forced that image out of his mind on his way to the bridge. Whatever was going on between Ilke and Dallas didn’t bode well for the *Marathon*. Doubting Alice was bad enough.

Rixby looked up from her perch on top of her workstation when Eckhart walked in. “I used the chip to access Aistenz’s bank accounts.”

He threw himself into his chair and took the regulators. He fired up the engines and turned the ship around.

She hesitated a lot longer than he expected before she asked, “Where are you going?”

“I’m going to Sohiri.”

She nodded. “We should be able to buy enhanced heat shielding from Skarekd. He usually carries goods like that.”

Eckhart didn’t answer. He let his thoughts wander while he steered to Sohiri. The crew would handle it better if they didn’t find out until the last moment what he planned to do.

Actually, no, they wouldn’t, but putting them in danger so he could finish the job didn’t sit right with him.

He entered orbit and tapped out a few instructions on his controls. The ship slotted into a smooth rotation around the planet and a communications signal came to his console from the ground.

An alien covered in grey fur appeared on his display. “The usual, Eckhart—Celdian and Datrium? You’ll never learn to play nice with the other children, will you?”

Eckhart had to laugh. “Thanks for the compliment, pal, but we have plenty of Celdian and Datrium. We just supplied on Zuic.”

Skarekd cocked his head and narrowed his eyes. “Zuic! What were you doing there?”

“Getting shot at by the Aegeans—what else? Do you have any shipments going out to the Silvercloud Vault, Skarekd?”

Rixby spun around so fast she almost toppled off her workstation. “Shipments going out to the…!”

Eckhart held up his hand for silence and Skarekd scratched his ear. “I might, I might. A prisoner barge has been parked here for about a week. They stopped here and took on a full load of Guk cakes.” He made a disgusted face. “It’s a miracle they show up at the prison with any living prisoners, if that’s what they feed them en route.”

“Who runs the barge?” Eckhart asked.

“The Jackal Clan runs it, but it’s completely manned by Kadrok raiders. I can only guess they get paid by the head on delivery, whether the prisoners are alive or dead. They’re leaving in a couple of hours.”

“That’s perfect. I’ll see you in a few minutes, Skarekd.”

Eckhart signed off. Rixby stood still on her workstation and regarded him with her antennae pricked. “What are you going to do?”

He pointed to her workstation. “Take us down to the surface. I’m going out on the outpost. As soon as I’m gone, I want you to read the instructions I left you on the ship’s mainframe. Don’t read it until I’m gone. Understand?’

She didn’t answer. She just stood there, rooted to the surface of her workstation. She must sense that his instructions wouldn’t be anything she would want to follow.

He went downstairs to find Bing and Dallas in the cargo hold. “How’s Ilke?” Eckhart asked.

“She’s fine,” Dallas replied.

Eckhart studied his friend’s helmet. He considered telling Dallas the truth and immediately discarded the thought.

Eckhart had just gone through Aistenz’s personnel files on the chip. The chip listed dozens of names from the Bloody Blossoms who were loyal to Aistenz. Ilke’s name wasn’t on the list, but Dallas didn’t need to know that—not yet.

The ship boomed and shuddered when Rixby set the *Marathon* down on Sohiri. Eckhart went to one of the lockers and tugged off his jacket. Then he unbuckled his sidearms and put everything in the locker. He didn’t like going unarmed, but the Kadrok would only disarm him anyway.

“What are you doing?” Bing asked.

“I’m going on a little trip.” Eckhart waved toward the stairs. “Look after my ship while I’m gone.”

“Gone!” Bing exclaimed. “Are you leaving?”

Eckhart smiled sadly at his friend. “Rixby knows all about it. I’ll see you soon. Don’t worry about me.”

He said the words, but he didn’t feel them. Dread settled over his heart. If he didn’t go now, he would lose his nerve.

He opened the hatch and stepped outside. The setting sun dipped behind the outpost. Five enormous freighters dwarfed a low, squat building. One of them was the prison barge, and he wasn’t looking forward to getting on it.

He trotted over to the outpost and skirted around behind it. He pressed his ear to the back door and heard shouts coming from inside.

He held his breath and commanded his heart to stop beating against his ribs, but it didn't listen to his commands. Cold sweat broke out on his palms.

A whistling sound faded into the sky as the *Marathon* launched out of the atmosphere and disappeared into space. He was alone and unarmed on this planet with a bunch of Kadroks who wanted to capture him.

He tightened his grip on the doorknob, took a deep breath, and burst inside. The Kadroks froze, staring at him for a minute, and then they pounced on him as one.

He barely had time to raise his arms over his head before seven of them attacked from all sides. They rained him with punches and drove him to the ground. They kicked and pummeled him with clubs. He felt ribs snap, and splitting pain shot through his shoulder into his chest.

He huddled on the ground for protection, but when the beating stopped, he screamed in pain when they grabbed hold of his broken limbs and hauled him back outside.

He heard Skarekd yelling at the Kadroks to stop, but they paid no attention. Their low, guttural barks echoed back and forth through the gathering darkness.

His broken body bounced on the rough metal ramp when they dragged him into the prison barge, and he screamed again when they threw him down into a sea of bodies packed in the hold.

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8

“YOU DID WHAT!” Alice bellowed. “YOU JUST LET HIM WALK OUT OF HERE—JUST LIKE THAT? WHY DIDN’T YOU STOP HIM?”

Bing tried to shrink away from her, but she only followed up her advantage. She seized him by the neck with one hand and brandished her fist in his face. She shoved him hard against the galley wall.

“Don’t blame me!” he cried. “I had no idea what he was going to do.”

Dallas stomped over and shoved his giant arms between them. He forced Alice and Bing apart. “None of us knew what he planned to do. He didn’t tell us.”

“He told me to check his instructions after he left the ship,” Rixby explained. “He told me not to read them until after he was gone.”

“And that didn’t tip you off?” Alice rounded on the little alien. “Why the hell didn’t you read them BEFORE he left the ship?”

“Drop it,” Dallas replied in his cool undertone. “Eckhart makes up his own mind. He must know what he’s doing.”

Alice gave a sick laugh. “You are NOT serious! He never knows what he’s doing.”

“Then I guess he didn’t know what he was doing when he took you on board this ship,” Bing muttered.

“Come over here and say that to my face,” she snapped.

“That’s enough,” Dallas boomed in a much different tone. “None of this is getting Eckhart back, and if he’s right, then following his instructions is the best way to help him.”

“There *is* no way to help him,” Alice countered. “He’s on a prison barge on his way to the Silvercloud Vault. He’s finished and we’re on our own.”

“What do the instructions say?” Clifton asked.

“He wants us to get the heat shielding from another outpost,” Rixby began.

“Which outpost?” Dallas asked.

“Taio.”

“What the hell for?” Alice demanded. “Skarekd will have the

shielding. What the hell are we doing whizzing through the damn galaxy instead of getting it while we were there?"

"It's obvious, isn't it?" Rixby replied. "He sent some signal to Skarekd's outpost. He tipped off the Kadroks that he'd be coming through so they would capture him and take him on board their barge. He wants to get inside the prison so he can contact Akkek."

"Are you seriously suggesting," DeWalt asked, "that Eckhart put out a contract on himself?"

Bing burst out laughing, but immediately stopped when Alice snarled at him. "It certainly looks that way."

"But why?" Clifton asked. "He's supposed to get Akkek out of prison, not join her."

"There have been stories on the grapevine that Akkek only let herself get caught so she could get inside the Silvercloud Vault. Some people say she went in there to break out someone else."

"That makes sense," Dallas replied. "A Shisax should have been able to elude the Regiment. She never should have gotten captured in the first place."

"If that's true," Alice asked, "why hasn't she been able to break out of the prison herself? Why does she need Aistenz to hire us to do it for him?"

"None of that matters," Dallas replied. "We have our instructions. Eckhart needs us. I don't know about the rest of you, but I owe him too much. I'm going after him."

Ilke stood up and glided over to his side. She wrapped one of her limbs around his arm. "I'm going with you. Aistenz wouldn't hire Eckhart to do this job if it wasn't important."

"Of course it's important," Alice sneered. "It's Akkek Stratha."

"What else did his instructions say?" DeWalt asked. "Let me guess. It's something really dangerous."

"You bet it is. He wants us to get heat shielding from Taio and enter the crater of Mount Graelges. He wants us to meet him there when he gets Akkek out."

"How does he plan to do that?"

"His instructions don't tell us anything about what he plans to do once he gets inside the prison," Rixby explained.

"That's because he doesn't have a flippin' clue what he'll do once he gets inside the prison," Alice growled. "He's flying blind."

"If he gets inside and makes contact with Akkek," Ilke replied, "he'll have an asset worth more than any weapon or defense we

could find on the outside. It's a stroke of genius."

Everyone rounded on her. "How do you figure?" Clifton asked. "They'll be locked up in the strongest prison in the galaxy."

Ilke shook her head. "You don't know Akkek. I wouldn't worry about Eckhart and Akkek getting to the exit in the crater. I'd be more worried about us than them."

Everyone fell silent, and Dallas thought the matter over. In a way, he agreed with Ilke. Eckhart would be much better off inside the Silvercloud Vault with Akkek Stratha than the *Marathon* would be outside it. Even getting the shielding posed so many obstacles that he didn't like to think about it.

He scanned the cargo hold. Bing. Alice. Rixby. Ilke. Clifton. DeWalt. Six people. He knew he could count on each of them to do their part, but the prospects still didn't look good.

Eckhart was gone. Dallas could punch the guy for not warning the crew about what he would do, but Dallas would only have tried to talk him out of it.

Rixby said Eckhart made the decision on the spur of the moment. As soon as he heard the Kadroks were leaving that night, he made his decision to hitch a ride to the prison.

Dallas turned to Rixby. "Lay in a course for Taio."

"We're already en route. We'll be there in half an hour. I've also contacted Tictus. He has the shielding, but we have to fly to the ReSoil department to get it."

Bing groaned and shut his eyes. "Oh, please, no!"

"What is that?" DeWalt asked. "What's the ReSoil department?"

"It's a supply station manned by the Freilo separatists."

"I don't understand," Clifton said. "What's so bad about them?"

"You should stay on board," Ilke told DeWalt. "The Freilo separatists will be anxious to capture you for the Regiment reward."

"Reward!" DeWalt's wild gaze skipped around the rest of the group. "You never said they were offering a reward."

"He can't stay here," Dallas decided. "We need him to help us break into the ReSoil Department to get the shielding. We'll never get Eckhart back without it."

An alarm went off on Rixby's remote workstation. "We're entering orbit on Taio. Tictus says the shielding is waiting for us at the ReSoil depot."

Dallas passed a hand across his helmet. "I sure wish Eckhart was here. He could just waltz in and get it. That man has friends in

every corner of the galaxy."

"Friends and enemies," Ilke added.

Rixby waddled over to the stairs. "I'm going up to the bridge."

Dallas motioned the others toward the hatch. "Arm up. Rixby will drop us off, and then we'll need to get into the depot and out of it in a big fat hurry."

"How do we do that?" Clifton asked.

"Shoot anything that moves." Bing took his pounders down from the weapons locker, and he and Alice got busy loading their guns.

Dallas attached his Datrium aperture to the port next to the hatch. Clifton came over to get his guns and glanced down at the aperture locked into the ship's bulkhead. "What is that?"

"I'm taking on Datrium," Dallas told him. "I'm depleted after that battle on Zuic."

Clifton nodded toward Ilke. She didn't need weapons or ammunition or Datrium. She stood near the hatch waiting for the others to join her. "What's the deal with her?"

"What about her?"

"Who is she? How do you know we can trust her?"

Dallas glanced over at Ilke. He could think of a lot of things to say to answer that question, but none of them would make sense to Clifton.

"Let me put it this way," he finally replied. "Never trust anyone. Always be ready for everyone to screw you over whenever it suits them."

Clifton's eyes widened and he stared at Dallas through his helmet. "I thought you two were, like, an item."

"We are."

Dallas unlocked his Datrium aperture and walked away. He went over to Ilke, and she smiled up at him.

She looked amazing—even better than Dallas remembered. He'd forgotten how good it felt when she wrapped her arms around him, even if it didn't feel the same through his armor.

Her eyes sparkled in such an alluring way. He struggled to remember why he didn't go looking for her sooner.

She slipped one arm around his waist and beamed up at him. "I missed you. I waited for you for years, but you never came back."

He tried to look away and found it impossible. He felt himself sinking into her embrace and the mindless depths of her eyes. "Maybe…"

“What?” she whispered. “Why didn’t you come back? I thought we had something.”

He relaxed into her powerful grip. “Maybe…maybe I thought you wouldn’t want me like this. Maybe I thought I wasn’t the man you knew before, now that I’m…like this.”

“Of course I want you. I never stopped wanting you. You’re still the same man. You have to know that.”

He started to answer when the hatch opened in front of him. The *Marathon* drifted toward the ground and landed on the edge of a giant forest. The trees grew ten times as high as the ship. Their massive crowns tossed and swayed in a heavy wind gusting over the surrounding mountains.

A high wooden fence surrounded a stockade across a field cleared of trees. Smoke billowed from inside the stockade, and a bunch of gunners on the parapet rotated their giant ion disruptors toward the ship.

“Who are these people?” Clifton murmured.

“Freilo,” Bing whispered back. “They’ll start shooting as soon as we set foot on their land.”

“Why don’t they shoot now?”

“They have a code,” Ilke told him. “They only shoot trespassers, and their rules state that someone actually has to set foot on their land to be a trespasser.”

“That’s the weirdest set of rules I ever heard,” DeWalt remarked.

“Why did your contact tell us to get the shielding from here?” Clifton asked.

“Tictus has a contract with the Freilo,” Bing replied. “The Freilo have to supply Tictus’s customers.”

“So,” DeWalt asked, “they’re going to supply us by shooting at us?’

“Basically, yeah.” Bing snapped the Datrium magazine into his pounder. “Let’s go. I have a date tonight.”

On any other day, Dallas would have followed up the joke with a snide remark about Bing’s non-existent love life, but not today.

Dallas tightened his fingers into fists, and his assault guns slotted out of his armored wrists. They locked in place and his plasma jets hummed, injecting Datrium into the ports.

Targeting information flashed inside his helmet. It told him the location of every Freilo fighter in the stockade and where the separatists stored the shielding the crew had to retrieve. “Go!”

Ilke reacted faster than Dallas ever imagined possible. She streaked out of the hold and made it halfway across the field before anyone else. She exploded out of herself and lasers burst from every limb.

Her hair scattered in a halo of black, with lasers spouting from each strand. At the same moment, the *Marathon*'s guns rotated backward and locked. Plasma rocketed across the field and smashed into the fence.

Dallas charged. Bing and Alice kept pace with him, bombarding the fence with their pounders.

Dallas's targeting system pinged from one body shape to the next along the fence top. He swept his assault guns back and forth, taking out the gunners and sentries covering the field with carpets of ion disruptions.

Clifton and DeWalt couldn't run as fast as the rest, but they held their own and fired through breaches the ship blew in the fence. In seconds, Ilke hurtled through the nearest gap and the sphere of whirling lasers vanished into the stockade.

Dallas dove inside and a devastating smash of pounder fire crashed against his armor from his right. He staggered under the assault, and Bing and Alice huddled in the breach to stay out of the line of fire.

Ilke saw what was going on and came racing back, but another group of separatists cut her off from reaching Dallas. He tried to rally when three separatists appeared in an upstairs window.

They aimed a huge pounder directly at him and fired. The shot toppled him, and he crashed into a building behind him. They might have destroyed him completely if the *Marathon* hadn't vaulted into the air and rained fire and brimstone on the stockade from above.

A blistering crackle of plasma hit the tower where the separatists were hiding. The building detonated in a whirling cloud of matchsticks and Alice, Bing, Clifton, and DeWalt raced into the fort.

Dallas sprang to his feet and threw himself between his friends and another group of Freilo closing from another side street to the right. He blocked their plasma shots, and Alice towed the other three away.

"Over here!" she yelled. "The shielding is this way."

Dallas whipped up his assault guns and showered his enemies with lead. The separatists dove for cover behind a different building

and left him alone.

He looked around for Ilke, but she was nowhere in sight. He retreated to track down Alice and the others.

He found them crouched behind an overturned trough near a foundry where a dozen Freilo blacksmiths worked over their forges. They cast only momentary glances at the intruders. They must have seen battles like this a thousand times before.

The four friends hunkered behind the trough as Freilo defenders bombarded them with ion disrupters. Dozens of defenders guarded a large warehouse, and their guns made the weapons from the parapet look puny. Whatever they wanted to protect was inside this warehouse.

"Where's Ilke?" Bing hollered over the noise. "We could really use her right now."

Dallas scanned the stockade. His sensors showed the whole layout of the depot through the many buildings surrounding him. He didn't see Ilke until….

She sprang out of nowhere. One minute, she was nowhere to be seen. The next, she streaked into view and collided with the defenders blocking the warehouse.

She tumbled into view, spraying laser shots from every limb. She fired so fast that not even Dallas's enhanced senses could keep up with her.

She rolled over the defenders, cutting down everyone in her path. She took up a position in front of the warehouse and left no one standing.

At that moment, another battalion of separatists raced around a corner behind the crew's hiding place. They fired, and would have killed everyone if Dallas hadn't blocked their disrupter fire. "Get inside!" he ordered. "Find the shielding and get back to the ship."

Alice sprang to her feet and hurtled the trough. Bing followed, and they hustled over to the warehouse wall. Bing crouched and brought out three Halfanite blocks from his backpack.

He planted them against the wall and set the primers. Ilke and Dallas guarded his back while Bing blew the wall and ducked inside.

Dallas scanned the surroundings. Scuffling sounds issued from the hole while the friends scrambled around inside the warehouse.

Four different separatist groups snuck around the back streets, trying to find a way to attack the friends, but they didn't dare come

out in the open with Dallas and Ilke standing guard.

"What's taking so long?" he called over his shoulder. "Do you have it?"

"We found it!" Alice replied from inside. "We're just making sure it's all here before we—"

"Dallas!" Rixby chirped inside his helmet. She was signaling him from the *Marathon*. "Get them out of the warehouse—fast!"

Dallas froze. "What's up?"

"Get away from the warehouse, Dallas!" Rixby shrieked. "The Regiment—"

He started to turn around when a bone-crushing impact rocked the ground. He dove sideways and grabbed Ilke, but it was already too late.

Concussion missiles showered out of the atmosphere and bombed every inch of the stockade. Projectiles smashed into buildings and blasted them to smithereens.

One deafening ka-boom after another tore the depot apart. Dallas hurled Ilke away, and then scrambled back to the breach in the warehouse wall. Alice, Bing, Clifton, and DeWalt cowered inside, as if staying in the building could save them from the bombardment.

Dallas thrust his arm through the hole and seized the giant bundle Alice and Bing had been lugging between them. He hauled it out and then grabbed Alice. "Come on! Get out of the warehouse!"

Clifton and DeWalt scrambled out, and Dallas practically dragged his friends away just in time. Four missiles crashed through the roof and the whole warehouse blew in a massive explosion.

Freilo women and children ran screaming through the stockade, seeking shelter anywhere, only to be met with more exploding buildings everywhere they turned.

Dallas hefted the shielding package and fitted it into a storage cavity in his armor while he herded his friends away.

Ilke hovered a few feet off firing lasers into the sky, but she couldn't defeat the twenty Regiment Colossus-class battleships descending on the planet. No way in hell could they be coming for the Freilos. The Freilos had operated on this planet for generations, and the Regiment always left them unmolested.

The Regiment could only be here for one thing, and it wasn't the *Marathon* crew, either. Dallas propelled his friends through the streets, but the stockade didn't have any streets left. The whole

depot was nothing more than one cloud of mayhem, noise, and flying debris.

He charged for the forest and had to retreat as three Colossuses rotated their guns at him. He tackled Bing and Clifton behind a pile of shattered logs as the Regiment laid into the stockade with all their guns.

"We have to get out of here!" Bing yelled.

"No shit!" Alice bellowed back. "There *is* no way out!"

Dallas heard Rixby screaming inside his helmet, but he couldn't understand her over the noise. She wouldn't be able to get near the crew with so many Regiment ships around, anyway. He only hoped she got to a safe distance before the Regiment decided to go after her.

He switched off his communications channel to the *Marathon*. He needed to think without Rixby distracting him. He turned on his scanners and read the scene in a heartbeat.

He grabbed Alice. "This way!"

"No!" She tried to pull back. "That leads back to the warehouse."

"Come on!" he roared. "If we stay out here, we'll be dead for sure."

He pushed her and the two Earthlings in front of him. Bing hung close to his side while Ilke shot thousands of particles out of the air with her blinding lasers. She did her best to protect the fleeing friends from the worst of it.

They retreated back to where the warehouse used to be. The Regiment had hit the building with so many missiles that nothing remained, not even a pile of broken sticks. Everything had blown outward to the four winds.

Dallas stepped onto the concrete foundation. His sensors led him unerringly to a crater in the very center. He kicked a few broken blocks aside to reveal a hole in the concrete pad. It could only have been built into the structure itself. "Get down there! Hurry! There's no time to waste."

"Are you sure about this?" DeWalt asked.

Dallas didn't bother to answer. He seized DeWalt, wrapped his arms around the banker's chest, and jumped down through the hole.

Alice, Clifton, and Bing followed a second later. The last thing Dallas saw was Ilke streaking toward them and pulling in her many

limbs. She tightened into a compact black ball and plunged through the hole.

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9

Eckhart struggled to pry his eyes open and moaned in agonized relief when he saw a Yakit bending over him. The creature was a female, but all too recognizable.

"They beat you pretty badly," she murmured down into Eckhart's swollen face.

"I…I know," he choked. "I was there."

She burst out laughing. "Why are you out this far, Earthling? You shouldn't be here."

Eckhart had to think hard to realize that she was talking about him. He'd been around the *Marathon* crew for too long. His friends and most of the rest of the aliens he usually associated with never treated him like an Earthling.

They joked that he was an honorary alien, but not all aliens on the fringes knew who he was. To them, he was still one of the enemy.

"I have a Yakit friend," he told her. "We served on the same crew for many years."

She frowned down at him. "You're lying. Earthlings don't have alien friends."

He shut his eyes and concentrated on not giving into despair. His whole body screamed in pain. If he didn't convince this Yakit to give him some Eplite, the prison officials might decide to put him down when he got to the Silvercloud Vault.

"Maybe I'm not like other Earthlings."

She prodded his broken arm and he winced. "You look like an Earthling to me."

He gulped down rising panic and started shivering uncontrollably. If she hated Earthlings anywhere near as much as most aliens did, she would never help him. She would sit here and watch him die, and she would be happy about it.

That prospect was looking increasingly likely right now, but maybe he wasn't finished yet. He chose his next words with care. "What's your name?"

"The hell you care."

"I do care." He opened his eyes and tried to look around. "We

have a long trip to Silvercloud Vault."

"Not so long. You've been unconscious for a few days."

Eckhart groaned. "Wonderful. Maybe I can stay unconscious for the rest of the trip."

She watched him in silence for a moment. He watched her expression change until she finally said, "My name is Lashar."

He nodded and immediately regretted it. His head throbbed and his vision swam in another overpowering wave of nausea and pain. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

She tipped her head to one side and examined him. "What is your Yakit friend's name?"

He shut his eyes again. "Bing. His name is Bing."

"That is not a Yakit name. I knew you were a liar."

"He's a half-breed. He's half Yakit and half Xirrek. He grew up on Xirrek, and his Yakit relatives gave him a Xirrek name as an insult."

She fell silent again, and this time, he knew she would leave him to die. The Xirrek persecuted the Yakit mercilessly, and Bing's Yakit relatives had taken out their resentment on Bing. He grew up an outcast by both races.

Eckhart shrank into his own world of misery and hopeless anguish when she startled him into opening his eyes again. "You're talking about Boral."

"Huh? Who's that?"

"The Yakit-Xirrek half-breed you mentioned. His name is Boral."

Eckhart frowned and flinched again when his bruised cheek pinched. "What do you mean? I don't know anyone named Boral."

"He had a sister who loved him. She tried to defend him and took punishment for him, but she couldn't save him from the worst. They met in secret, and she gave him part of her food rations to keep him going when he would have starved."

Eckhart stared up at her, but she wasn't looking at him anymore. She gazed out over the mob of prisoners crowded in the barge hold.

"She searched her parents' records, and when that failed, she snuck into the Xirrek's headquarters. She found out her brother's real name when none of the other Yakit would call him anything but insults. She told him his real name to give him the courage to endure until he could escape."

Eckhart gulped down a mixture of heartbreaking grief and soaring hope. "Are *you* Bing's sister?"

She shook her head, still looking in the other direction. “The Xirrek found out about her intrusion and they killed her, but she left another person with the knowledge. I was her friend. I watched over her brother and left food and money hidden for him. He never knew who left it for him.” She turned to stare down at him. “You must never tell him you met me. She swore me to secrecy before she died.”

Eckhart nodded, and for some reason, his head didn’t hurt as much. “I won’t tell him. You can rely on me.”

She bent over, and before he could stop her, she pulled open his mouth and spat a mouthful of Eplite onto his tongue. He groaned in relief as blessed, blessed relaxation washed over him. His pain faded and his whole body eased into the floor beneath him.

“Thank you,” he breathed. “Thank you.”

“Why are you here? Did you displease the Regiment somehow?”

He laughed. He couldn’t help it. “Oh, I displeased them. I displeased them very much.”

“Then you must be a different kind of Earthling.”

He laughed even louder. He didn’t know what kind of Earthling he was, but he didn’t have time to answer. A shout went up across the hold as a bunch of Kadroks marched through the prisoners.

They clubbed the prisoners aside and bellowed orders. “Get up! Get up, all of you! Get in line over there! Anyone too weak to stand will be thrown over the side.”

Lashar sprang away from Eckhart. He peeled himself off the floor, still aching from so many broken bones, but he had to stand up no matter what.

Lashar didn’t hurry to get in line, though. She grabbed three more Yakit who squatted nearby. She murmured something to them, and they came over to Eckhart. One after another, they each gave him a mouthful of Eplite and then plunged into the crowd to join the other prisoners.

He straightened up. His legs, arms, and ribs still hurt, but the pain faded by the second. That much Eplite could knit broken bones in no time.

He got into line before the Kadroks reached him. They gave him dirty looks, but they didn’t club him.

He lost track of the Yakits in the confusion, but he already knew how to repay Lashar. He wished he could tell Bing her story, but a promise was a promise.

The barge crashed into something solid, and the whole vessel jolted to a halt. Some of the prisoners screamed in fright and earned themselves more blows from the Kadroks.

The aliens herded the prisoners to a large loading door on one end of the barge. It boomed open and the Kadroks laid into everyone with their clubs again.

The prisoners ran out of the barge and packed into a windowless hold flanked by Xunov guards. They didn't look any less intimidating than the Kadroks, but at least the guards stood still and didn't attack anyone.

The Kadroks gathered around another Xunov. This one wore a uniform unlike the others, and he handed out payment chips to the Kadrok crewmen. They cheered and ran back to their barge.

They shoved the prisoners out of the way while they pitched bodies and unconscious prisoners into the hold. Then they slammed the loading doors and disappeared.

The Xunov officer paced around the hold, calling instructions to the new arrivals, but Eckhart barely heard him. He examined his surroundings in detail.

Neither the Kadrok barge nor this hold gave him any clue which of the entrances the Kadroks used to bring the prisoners inside the Silvercloud Vault, but it had to be one of the two. The barge didn't look all that advanced, and he didn't see how the Kadroks could afford heat shielding strong enough to penetrate the planet's lava flows.

From the way they were acting, the Kadroks probably spent their earnings as soon as they got them in hand. They must have used the entrance through Mount Graelges.

The officer eventually stopped talking, and the guards steered the prisoners out of the hold. The prisoners filed in a long line between barred cells on both sides, but they were all empty.

Eckhart inspected the individuals nearest him and then the others in the line. Most of them kept their eyes down. They wore rags, and most looked undernourished.

The prisoners who got off the barge consisted mostly of Yakit, Iawei, Eitis, and a few Oumia. These were all poor species who almost never turned to crime, so how did they get here?

The guards escorted everyone into another large hold-like chamber. The guards flanked the queue while each new prisoner passed before a board of officers seated at a table.

The officers pulled up each prisoner's records and went over their conviction, the charges, their history, and their origins.

As he suspected, the officers determined that most of the so-called prisoners were simply caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. The Kadroks padded their barge with any unfortunate aliens they could kidnap to earn themselves the bounty of bringing them to the prison.

"Flag Duzir's crew," one of the officers snarled. "That's the tenth time he's brought us a totally useless cargo. Alert the outer defense maintenance crew to bar his ship from entry, and prepare all these prisoners for transport back to Trekeg Station."

He went through the next ten prisoners much more rapidly. He determined that they didn't belong in the Silvercloud Vault and sent them on their way…until he came to Eckhart.

The officer scowled first at his computer screen and then at Eckhart. "Your records state that you deserted from the Regiment and that you were responsible for destroying Kukuri Station. Is that true?"

Eckhart held the alien's gaze. "I didn't desert from the Regiment. I resigned my commission and I was honorably discharged."

"How did you come to destroy Kukuri Station, then? Do you deny the report listed here?" The officer waved at his computer.

Eckhart knew exactly which report the man meant, because Eckhart was the one who'd sent it. He sent it to Sohiri to get himself captured.

Destroying Kukuri Station was the only crime Eckhart had committed that was serious enough to get him sent to the Silvercloud Vault. He could have invented one, but he probably couldn't have invented anything nearly as bad, and he preferred to get imprisoned for something he actually did.

"No," he said simply. "I don't deny it."

The officer compressed his lips. "These are very serious accusations…and yet you were never brought to trial. We don't accept prisoners who haven't been brought to trial."

Eckhart fought down the urge to smile at the officer's confusion. "Do you really want to let me go? The Regiment won't like it if they find out you had me in custody and turned me loose without even telling them I was here."

The officer snorted through his nose and turned back to his computer. "Have it your way. Transfer to main population. Go

stand over there."

He waved to one side and Eckhart crossed the hold to stand by himself. He caught Lashar looking at him from the opposite group.

Her eyes widened in terror that he was staying here while she and her fellow Yakit got shipped back to who knew where, but Eckhart only smiled at her.

He waited while the officers sorted the rest of the group. Eckhart was the only one selected to stay. Those Kadroks were the scum of the universe, and no mistake.

In the end, only Eckhart remained, along with the guards. The officers were too absorbed in their own business to watch the guards lead Eckhart out of the hold.

They filed down a corridor made of wire mesh, through a locked door, and into a vast prison block lined with thousands of cells, each one protected by bars facing the main gallery. Staircases and scaffolding rose to the ceiling many stories overhead.

Eckhart didn't see any exceptional security in here. In fact, the prison looked like a crumbling relic of a bygone era, so all the major defenses must be outside. All that stuff about weight sensors in the cells must be just a rumor. This prison didn't have anything near that level of technology.

The prison architects must assume that any prisoners who escaped the main population wouldn't be able to get out of the prison, much less off the planet—and they would be right.

The guards conducted him up several flights of stairs to the tenth level. Eckhart glanced as quickly as possible into each cell he passed. He searched the prisoners for anyone who came close to Akkek Stratha's description, but he didn't see any females or anyone small enough.

Nearly every prisoner came from some monstrous alien race. They barely fit in their cells and they went into ballistic rages, smashed the bars, and hurled curses and obscenities at Eckhart and the guards as they passed.

By the time the guards stopped in front of an empty cell, the whole block boomed and rang with bellowing voices. The prisoners jumped up and down, pounded the floor with their giant fists, beat their chests, and some even bounced off the walls and ceilings in their frenzy.

The guards unlocked the cell, slid back the bars, and motioned Eckhart inside. He hesitated for the first time since he'd come up

with this cockamamie plan. What if he'd made a mistake? What if Akkek had already escaped from this prison?

He would be locked up in here, probably forever, with no way out. He couldn't count on Aistenz to send some other poor mercenary to get him out. Eckhart wasn't nearly as valuable as Akkek Stratha, no matter what nonsense sunshine Aistenz blew up Eckhart's ass.

The guards shot him dirty looks, and a particularly fearsome Xunov right in front of Eckhart tightened his grip on his baton. They all looked perfectly capable of throwing him into the cell against his will if it came to that.

Eckhart couldn't back out now. He stepped across the threshold, and the bars slammed shut behind him.

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10

Eckhart turned around and faced the main gallery. He could see directly across the block to the cells on the other side.

Prisoners in those cells had already started to lose interest in the new arrival. They stopped jumping up and down and went back to whatever they were doing before he showed up…all except one.

A giant creature crouched in a cell to Eckhart's right. It squatted on its haunches and lifted a large bone to its slobbering mouth.

It bared its fangs and nibbled some dried gristle still clinging to the bone while it examined Eckhart with interest. Maybe it was imagining gnawing *his* bones instead.

Eckhart told himself to look away and pretend not to notice the creature, but the thing held his gaze.

"New bait!" a shrill voice called from his left. "Hey! New bait!"

He pressed his forehead to the bars and spotted a long appendage extending from the next cell. A cluster of antennae wavered from the end of it, and eyes blinked at him from what would have been the fingertips.

An audible gasp went up when he looked down into those eyes. "Eckhart! Adam Eckhart! What the hell are you doing here?"

Eckhart frowned. "Gaemo? How did you get in here?"

"I just asked you the same thing!" The arm waved. "Shit, boy! I never thought I'd ever see you in here."

"Yeah, well, reports of my stupidity have been greatly understated."

Gaemo exploded into such a gurgly burst of laughter that several prisoners across the block turned to stare. "You were always so funny! You're gonna make the time go so much quicker now that you're here."

Eckhart grimaced. He didn't want to make the time go quicker. He wanted to get the hell out of here, but he had to find Akkek first.

"Hey, Gaemo," he began. "I'm actually here on a job."

Gaemo froze staring at him. "A job! You're bullshitting me!"

"No, I'm here on a job for Aistenz Trotaer."

Gaemo gaped at him in stunned shock.

Eckhart scanned the cells he could see. "I'm looking for Akkek

Stratha. Do you know where she is?" Gaemo still didn't answer. Eckhart furrowed his eyebrows at the creature's hand. "Gaemo? Are you okay?"

"Akkek Stratha!" Gaemo whispered under his breath. "Aistenz Trotaer!"

"Yeah. Do you know where Akkek is? Is she in one of these cells?"

Gaemo shivered and snapped out of his stupor. "Akkek Stratha… I don't know. I haven't seen her."

"How long have you been here, Gaemo?"

"Me?" Gaemo glanced behind him toward the creature with the bone. "I've been here…um…about ten years, I think."

"Ten years! Then you would have been here when Akkek was incarcerated."

"Um." Gaemo kept glancing around shiftily. "Um, yeah. I was. I heard all about it. I was in here."

"Then you would have seen her brought in. You would have seen her walk through that door just like I did."

Gaemo started to pull his arm back through his bars. "Look, Eckhart. I'd love to help, but I gotta go. See ya."

"Gaemo!" Eckhart seized the bars, seized Gaemo, and held him. "Hold it right there, Gaemo. I need answers."

"Let go of me!" Gaemo shrieked. "Let me go! I'll call the guards."

"Call the guards," Eckhart hissed. "Call the guards and tell them all about how you lifted seventy-five Triorium drives from Loigawa Station. If I ever get out of here, Gaemo, I'm going to see Aistenz again. I'll be sure to tell him all about how you stole forty-five kilos of Ufrium from his warehouse on Puthea and used it to poison fifty million Zusoi on Pheste. I'm sure Aistenz Trotaer would be very interested to hear all about that."

"Okay!" Gaemo shrieked. "Okay! I'll help you."

Eckhart released his hold, but not as quickly as he might have. "Don't screw with me, Gaemo, 'cuz I know where all the bodies are buried—or *aren't* buried, as the case might be."

Gaemo pulled his arm back, gasping and whimpering. Eckhart gave him a moment to compose himself. Eckhart took the time to study those prisoners he could see.

The giant with the bones had tossed his snack into a corner and was picking his teeth with a long, snaggly fingernail. For some

reason, he still stared at Eckhart while he did it. Why did that thing find Eckhart so fascinating?

Gaemo finally extended his arm, and he didn't look so cheery this time. "All right. I'll tell you."

"I'm listening."

Gaemo gasped a few more times. "They brought her in. She was just…little…way too little to last long in here. They put her over there." Gaemo gestured across the gallery.

"What—with the giant?" Eckhart asked.

"No—there." Gaemo pointed one of his eye-tipped fingers downward to the cell beneath the giant and two doors to the left. "She was there for about a year and a half."

"So what happened?"

"The guards…" Gaemo choked on the words. "They came for her one day. They took her out of the cell. I didn't hear what they said, but they must have said something pretty bad. The minute they got her on the stairs, she went nuts and started fighting. She kept screaming, 'No! Don't take me! You can't do this to me!' The guards…well, you know what they're like. They jumped on her and beat her up and dragged her away."

Eckhart waited for the end of the story. "So what did they do with her?"

"How should I know? They never brought her back to the main population. She's gone."

"She can't be gone," Eckhart declared. "If she was dead, the Regiment would have been singing the news from the rooftops. Instead, they've been broadcasting to the whole damn galaxy that she's still in here."

"I don't know about that. You can see Paco in the cell over there. They waited about three months, and when she didn't come back, they put him in there instead."

Eckhart studied the creature in Akkek's old cell. It looked like a Sataad, but one far older than any Sataad Eckhart had ever seen before. It looked like it was barely strong enough to stand, but it still paced back and forth in its cell. It shuffled to one wall, turned painfully around, and shuffled back the other way.

It did this over and over and over again without ceasing. Damn it. So Akkek really was gone.

If she had been in that cell, Eckhart could have called out to her. He could have communicated to her what he wanted to tell her, but

she wasn't there.

"Where do they take people who don't stay in the main population?" he asked Gaemo. "Is there another level—somewhere with even higher security?"

"I never heard of anything like that."

"What do they do with people who don't cooperate or try to escape?"

Gaemo looked away and didn't answer. He didn't have to. If anyone stopped cooperating or tried to escape, they could only end up one place and that was down the great white shithole in the sky…or down the great red lava flow in the not-sky.

"Listen, Eckhart," Gaemo quavered. "I know…I know I owe you and all, but… You can't ask me to do anything that could make my time here less…you know…less productive. You can't ask me to put myself at risk. I'm in enough trouble as it is. I just want to live out the rest of my days in peace. I don't want any trouble."

"Don't worry, Gaemo. I won't do anything to put you in danger."

Gaemo gave a pathetic little moan. "Ha! That means absolutely bupkis coming from you, Eckhart."

Eckhart turned away. He walked to the very back of the cell and sat down on the bench attached to the wall. This vantage point offered him the same view of the same seven or eight aliens across the gallery from him.

Gaemo retreated into his cell and didn't try to talk to Eckhart again. Finding Gaemo here had turned out to be a mixed blessing. It might be nice to have someone Eckhart knew to talk to.

On the other hand, the news that Akkek Stratha wasn't in the main population hit Eckhart hard. How the hell was he supposed to find her if she wasn't here?

Would he have to throw a fit and maybe attack the guards to get himself sent to wherever she was? That was more likely to get him killed.

He thought back over everything Aistenz had included in Akkek's file. Eckhart already knew it all before he read the file, so he could recall it perfectly.

Like most people, he was astounded she'd stayed in prison as long as she did. She was Shisax. She should have been able to disguise herself and slip out of the prison anytime she wanted, even a prison as sturdy as the Silvercloud Vault.

That story Gaemo told him didn't sound like it offered her any

opportunity to escape. Then again, if she did escape, why didn't the Regiment go after her? They would have rallied every friendly resource in the galaxy to hunt her down and retake her. They would have made an example of her to keep the rest of the alien hordes in line. That was the Regiment way.

He swiveled sideways and stretched out on the bench. He was just about to close his eyes when a familiar voice greeted him. "Wake up, Earthling! No time to sleep."

His eyes snapped wide open and he shot off the bench. "Lashar! I thought they shipped you back to the real world."

She grinned at him. "They shipped the others back. I asked to stay."

"You *what*?"

She laughed at him. She sounded disturbingly like Bing when she laughed. "I asked the officer to give me a job in the kitchens. He said that was the first time anyone ever asked to be allowed to stay here."

He rushed the bars and gripped them. He could have hugged her. He was so happy to see a friendly face. "You shouldn't have done that, Lashar. You should have gone back with your people."

She beamed at him. "I had to keep an eye on you…just in case you need more Eplite. These Xunov don't take very good care of the prisoners."

She shot a disgusted look over her shoulder toward no one in particular. That's when Eckhart noticed a bunch of food boxes loaded onto a cart. She had parked it in front of Gaemo's cell.

Gaemo's hands groped through the bars and took food from a box sitting on the floor in front of his cell. He pulled the food back through, and Eckhart heard him slurping out of sight.

"Listen to me, Lashar," Eckhart whispered. "I was wondering if you could do me a favor."

"Another one? What now?"

"I need to find out where they take prisoners who don't stay in the main population. I need to know if there's another place where they put uncooperative prisoners or anyone who doesn't behave in this main block. Could you do that for me? They'll probably send you there to deliver food."

She nodded, but she didn't look too hopeful. "I'll try, but I don't think there is any such place. The kitchen warden told me to bring the food here. He didn't mention any other place. All the prisoners

are in here."

Eckhart wilted. "Oh. Okay."

She handed him a box, but he couldn't pull it back through the bars. "I'll see you tomorrow. I'll let you know if I find out anything."

She wheeled her cart away and, a few minutes later, he saw her delivering food to the prisoners across the gallery.

He set the box on the floor and opened it. It contained four guinea bars, four tortoise-shell crack-thorn whistles, and a pile of powdered Wokladilla wafers.

He sank down on the floor with a heavy sigh. Was this what he had to look forward to for the rest of his time here—which might turn out to be the rest of his life?

He couldn't bring himself to eat this stuff, so he looked up and came face to face with the bone-gnawing giant again. The creature had another bone as bare as the first, but this one was definitely a different shape.

A similar box rested in front of the creature's cell, so where did it get the bones? Eckhart shuddered. Did that monster get the bones by killing other prisoners? Was that what happened to Akkek?

Despondency drove Eckhart back to his bench. He lay down and stared at the ceiling until he fell into a fitful sleep.

He jolted awake in near-total darkness. A few stray lights high up on the main gallery ceiling gave the only glimmer to break the gloom.

He sighed again when he remembered where he was. He started to shut his eyes and snapped to high alert when he sensed someone near him.

He jerked his head sideways, looking everywhere, but the cell was empty except for himself. Even the bone-chewer across the way was sound asleep. The creature's deep-throated snores drifted through the block.

Eckhart stiffened on his bench and braced himself to spring to his feet when a silky female voice murmured in his ear. "You're Eckhart, aren't you? I heard Gaemo talking to you earlier."

He swung upright, every nerve on end. "Who are you?" he hissed. "*Where* are you?"

"I'm right here next to you, but I can't show myself. I always check out the new prisoners. I heard every word you said to Gaemo. Is it true Aistenz Trotaer sent you here?"

Eckhart's pulse raced in his brain. He wanted to jump up and fight whoever this was, but he couldn't move. The cell was utterly empty. "Who are you? Show yourself now."

"I told you. I can't show myself. Don't worry. I don't mean you any harm."

"Who the hell are you?" Eckhart heard his voice rising and the monster across the way stirred in its sleep. "Answer me."

"It's only me, Eckhart. It's Akkek Stratha."

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11

Dallas yanked Alice and Bing down into the hole under the warehouse. He flung them aside so Clifton didn't flatten them when he jumped down after them.

Dallas grabbed Clifton just in time to save him from total destruction when Ilke zoomed through the opening.

The minute she got into the underground space, what sounded like dozens of rockets pounded the surface above the hole. The crew huddled close to the floor and covered their heads for protection.

Dallas leaned over them as dozens of rocks, blocks, and dirt clods peppered his armor. He held that position while the Regiment pulverized the area just a few feet above his head. Nothing would be left of the stockade when they finished with it.

The bombardment finally stopped, and a tense silence fell over the cavity. Sprinkles of dirt still pattered from the ceiling, but at least the Regiment wasn't shooting anymore.

Dallas straightened up, and Bing glanced toward the thin shaft of light beaming through the dusty hole. "I don't see anything."

"They're still out there. Make no mistake about that." Dallas extended his hand to Alice. "Is everyone okay?"

"What the hell is going on?" DeWalt croaked. "How did the Regiment find us here?"

"They must have a way to track you," Bing suggested. "If they infected you with that virus, they could have easily planted a tracking device on you."

"If they had a tracking device, they would have been all over our asses long ago," Alice pointed out. "We wouldn't be able to get away from them, not even on Zuic. They didn't come after us there."

Dallas moved his head closer to the hole and scanned the sliver of sky that he could see. "They're out there. They're hovering over the depot. They know where we are."

"So what are we going to do?" Clifton asked. "How can we get out of here without the *Marathon*? Rixby won't be able to bring the ship back here with the Regiment hanging around."

"Rixby is long gone," Bing replied. "The *Marathon* won't even be

on this planet anymore. She would have fled the instant the Regiment showed up."

"That's just great!" DeWalt huffed. "So she abandoned us. Now we're up the creek without a paddle."

"Settle down." Dallas turned around to scan the group. "We'll find a way out of—"

The others eased back from the hole, too. They fell into a loose circle to face each other and size up their situation.

As they did, a small noise caught Dallas's attention. He wouldn't have heard it during the bombardment. He spun around and the *Marathon* crew stared at a group of Freilo packed into the underground cavern along with them.

Twelve male separatists trained their rifles on the *Marathon* crew and guarded at least three dozen women and children hiding behind their men for protection.

Dallas and his friends stared at the Freilo in the same stunned shock as the Freilo stared at them. The two parties measured each other in breathless silence.

A myriad of scenarios ran through Dallas's mind. He could extend his assault guns. He could get his arms up faster than these Freilo could shoot, but did Dallas really want to mow down desperate women, children, and family men?

These might be the last survivors of the bombardment, and Dallas and the *Marathon* crew were the intruders here. They'd shot their way into the stockade in the first place.

At the end of the day, these people were in this situation because the *Marathon* led the Regiment here. The Regiment would never destroy a supply depot like this if the *Marathon* crew hadn't been here—or, more precisely, if DeWalt hadn't been here.

Dallas started to say something, but at that moment, DeWalt cleared his throat. Dallas's enhanced sensors detected the Freilo glancing at Clifton and DeWalt.

The women and children gawked at the two Earthling men in sheer, unvarnished terror. This must be the first time they'd ever been this close to the dreaded Earthlings.

Maybe DeWalt had been about to say something, and the noise of him clearing his throat pushed the Freilo over the edge. The sound set off the armed men. They swiveled toward him and three of them fired.

DeWalt stood closest to the Freilo in the circle of friends, and

the shots punched straight into his chest. He jolted backward from the impact, and Clifton and Bing caught him by both arms.

The Freilo cut their fire, still holding the rest of the group at gunpoint. The two parties blinked at each other in stunned shock over what just happened.

Clifton and Bing supported DeWalt by both arms. The banker's heels rested on the floor and his weight lay completely in his friends' grasp.

Dallas held himself stiff and tense. He should shoot back, but the attack came so suddenly and he'd just been telling himself not to kill them all that he didn't react.

His gaze migrated back to DeWalt. Clifton and Bing looked down at their fallen friend. Ilke and Alice both turned and everyone gaped at DeWalt in disbelief.

He pushed off with one leg, and Clifton and Bing responded by lifting him up. DeWalt stood up on his own feet and everyone stared in stupid shock at his chest where the bullets penetrated his torso. There was nothing there—no blood, no gaping holes in his flesh, no shattered ribs—nothing but six round holes torn in the front of his shirt.

The silence that greeted this realization hung heavier over the cavern than anything else. Dallas kept telling himself there must be something wrong with his sensors, but DeWalt was perfectly okay. He had been shot at least six times…but he hadn't been shot. He was totally unharmed.

All eyes rotated back to the Freilo. The gunmen in front of the separatists looked even more terrified, and some started panting and wheezing in panic. One young man on the end of the line jerked his head back and forth, searching the *Marathon* crew for a threat that never came.

The *Marathon* crew didn't move, but something triggered the gunmen. Without warning, they all opened fire at once. They unloaded their rifles into DeWalt's chest in a hail of gunfire. The cavern rang with explosions.

Bing and Alice both raised their rifles to shoot back. Dallas couldn't let that happen. He dove in front of them and knocked both weapons away.

He stood guard to make sure none of the rest of the crew interfered. Better to sacrifice DeWalt now than to walk away with so many innocent lives on their hands.

Something told him they wouldn't be sacrificing anyone. The separatists closed into a knot and their guns belched hundreds of shots. All their bullets pounded into DeWalt's chest.

He convulsed and danced under the assault, but he didn't fall over. He stood before them and took the full impact straight in the torso.

Ilke shrieked and rocketed forward. She would have flown in front of DeWalt, but Dallas flung out his arm and caught her. He held her back and pushed her behind him to let the attack play out to its end.

One rifle ran dry, followed by another. The separatists kept firing until all their guns clicked. Their empty magazines slotted out and hit the floor.

More than one of the Freilo kept pulling the trigger long after their ammo ran out. They kept trying to shoot DeWalt…and he stood before them as whole and alive and unharmed as before.

Dallas scanned the banker's ruined shirt. The bullets ripped the fabric to shreds. They vanished inside his body as though they were never there. Dallas would never have believed it if he didn't see it for himself.

"Um," Bing blurted out. "What the hell just happened?"

The *Marathon* crew glanced over at the stunned Freilo. The men still pointed their empty rifles at the friends, and some of the children started to cry.

Dallas couldn't move. He stared first at DeWalt's chest and then at the man's face. DeWalt kept glancing down at his own body and then around at his companions. His eyebrows went up in the middle, and his mouth opened and shut. He searched for some explanation even though there wasn't one.

His gaze skidded back to the Freilo, as if they could somehow explain why they hadn't been able to kill him.

The moment he looked in their direction, a woman screamed in the back of the crowd. The women and children whirled away and surged farther down the tunnel.

That scream set off the men. They spun around and started shoving and pushing their families away. They cast desperate glances behind them to make sure the *Marathon* crew didn't follow.

The *Marathon* crew didn't move. Dallas and his friends remained rooted to the spot, none of them capable of doing anything. They could only stand and stare while the Freilo fled before them. Dallas

didn't really blame them.

He watched them disappear deeper into the tunnel and then turned back to his comrades. Clifton puffed out his cheeks in a deep, resigned sigh. "Welp, that was different."

"You said he had a virus," Bing began.

Ilke shrugged. "That's what I heard. That was the report coming out of the Trinity Code. I didn't make it up."

"That was no virus." Dallas returned to the hole and looked out. "At least we don't have to worry about DeWalt getting shot."

"How do you explain it?" Clifton asked.

"I don't. We have more important things to worry about right now."

"Is the Regiment still out there?"

"They're there."

"What do you suggest?" Ilke asked. "Is there any other way off this planet?"

"Hold on. Give me a minute."

Dallas turned back to the cavity where the Freilo had been hiding. He adjusted his sensors to scan the area.

"Do you see anything?" Bing asked. "Is there anything down here but dust and more dust?"

Dallas trained his sensors into the tunnel where the Freilo ran away. "The Freilo are hiding in another bunker deeper under the forest. They're barricading it against us."

"As if we would want to go after them," Alice growled.

Dallas turned the other way, and his helmet showed him fluctuating readings from the bedrock all around him. "This tunnel connects to a maze of underground channels. The Freilo have equipment stashed all over the planet."

"Do they have any way to contact the *Marathon*?" Clifton asked.

"We don't want to contact the *Marathon*," Bing told him. "We'd be calling Rixby into a trap, and then we really would be stuck here."

"The Freilo have several ships hidden in underground hangars __"

"Great!" Clifton exclaimed. "Let's go."

"None of them is operational," Dallas finished. "None of them is fueled up, and even if they were, none of them is space worthy. There is one thing…"

"Tell us!" Bing demanded. "You're killing me over here."

“The Freilo planned to deploy a satellite. It’s attached to a rocket.”

Clifton shut his eyes and held up one hand. “Hold it. You want to ride on a *rocket* into *space*?”

“Does the rocket have any life support for people to ride on it?” Bing threw up both arms and pretended to spin away. “Why am I even asking?”

“What choice do we have?” Dallas asked. “Staying here isn’t an option.”

“How do we get there?” Ilke asked. “Do these tunnels go that far?”

“If you’re asking if we can get there without going out into the open,” Dallas began, “then the answer is no.”

“You had to ask, didn’t you?” Alice snarled. “When will you ever learn?”

Ilke only laughed at her. She extended one of her undulating limbs and wrapped it around Dallas’s forearm in a close, intimate squeeze. “I’m with you. I’ll help you.”

“Charming,” Alice growled.

Dallas turned his helmet toward the hole. “We’ll have to dodge the Regiment.”

“Dodge…the Regiment…” Clifton repeated in a thoughtful, considering tone. “That’s interesting. How do you plan to do that?”

Dallas didn’t answer. He surveyed the group. Besides Ilke, Bing was the only one of the crew who appeared even remotely cheerful about this plan. In fact, he looked downright delighted about it.

He smirked at everyone and earned himself another punishing growl from Alice. Dallas glanced over at DeWalt and immediately looked away.

The banker stood off to one side staring down at his own body with that stunned, stupid expression on his face. Dallas didn’t try to break through DeWalt’s shock. DeWalt could still run. When the time came to move, nothing else mattered.

Dallas positioned himself directly under the hole and trained his sensors on the Regiment ships patrolling the skies.

Alice appeared at his side and turned her hollow eye sockets to the sky, too. “This is insanity. You know that, right?”

“That’s why it just might work,” Ilke told her. “The Regiment won’t be expecting us to do something as reckless as this.”

“Reckless!” Clifton exclaimed. “You mean suicidal.”

“All the more reason they won’t be expecting it.”

Bing came over slinging his pounders into position. “What do you want us to do? Give us the word, big guy.”

Dallas pointed up the tunnel. “We’re going that way. As soon as you get onto the surface, just keep moving. Don’t stop. We’ll be right behind you.”

“Oh, I’ll keep moving,” Bing trilled. “You can always count on me to do that.”

“Just don’t get shot. That’s all I ask.”

Bing laughed. “I try to avoid it whenever possible.”

Dallas nodded. Four Regiment Banshees were just passing each other overhead. They glided away from each other to the limit of their patrol. They would turn and come back in a second. He would never find a better time than now.

He went down on one knee and bowed his head. He placed his hand flat on the floor with the palm facing up. “Go!”

Bing reacted in a flash. He jumped onto Dallas’s hand and Dallas flung his mighty arm upward with all his power. He propelled Bing up through the hole.

The Yakit soared into the sunshine. Alice burst into a full run at the same moment. She planted one foot on Dallas’s knee, stepped on Dallas’s shoulder, and hurtled upward out of the cavity.

Ilke transformed into the spinning ball of a thousand tentacles rotating and tumbling at blinding speed. She rocketed out of sight.

Dallas sprang to his feet, seized both Earthlings, and jumped. He landed in the dusty remains of the stockade, set the two men on their feet, and took off running as fast as he could.

“Let’s go!” he yelled to Clifton. “Run for it!”

Bing and Alice were already leaving the wrecked depot behind. Ilke whizzed faster than anyone, covering the miles without touching the ground.

Clifton bolted after them, but DeWalt’s shock held him back. Dallas didn’t try to reason with him. He grasped a fistful of DeWalt’s shirt and towed the banker into a dead run.

They made it a dozen yards before the missiles started falling. The four Banshees streaked to the spot and started bombing the hell out of the crew’s path to freedom—or, more likely, their path to destruction.

DeWalt started running on his own feet. Dallas had to check himself before he convinced himself he could let go of DeWalt.

Clifton and DeWalt couldn't keep up with the others, but speed didn't help anyone much. More Banshees converged on the spot and carpeted the ground with countless shots.

They cut off Ilke's path. She turned her laser fire on the attackers, but they only retreated out of her range and pelted her with Datrium jets, ion disruptors, and missiles.

Geysers of dust and ruptured soil surrounded her. Dallas couldn't see her through the confusion. Bing and Alice fired at the Regiment ships, but they couldn't do any damage at this range.

More Regiment ships swooped behind the group. They dropped close to the ground and unloaded on the fugitives. They would have mowed everyone down in moments, but Dallas dodged behind his friends and took the shots on his armor.

"Into the forest!" he ordered. "Get into the trees!"

Bing, Alice, and the two Earthlings veered sideways and plunged into the dense undergrowth, but so many explosions enveloped Ilke that she didn't hear him.

Dallas dove into the tornado of concussions and dust. The world went black, but his sensors still showed him a sphere of lasers bursting outward from a central point.

He raced to the spot and grabbed her. Rocket bursts hammered his armor and he heard her shrieking through the noise.

He dashed back the way he came, but the sheer devastation of the Regiment attack slowed him down. Plasma blasts made him stagger and he almost lost his grip on Ilke.

A rocket struck him in the head and he stumbled. He glanced around, trying to orient himself, but so much burning plasma surrounded his helmet that he couldn't locate the forest.

He hesitated in the heart of the mayhem. At that moment, someone grabbed his arm and pulled. He couldn't imagine which of the others would be foolish enough to come back into the assault to get him, but he didn't have a moment to hesitate.

He ran after his unseen helper and broke through the dust cloud. The forest lay dark and thick and impenetrable before him. He almost stopped running again when he found DeWalt at his side.

DeWalt showed no sign of damage, except that his clothes now hung in tatters. The banker's wild eyes skimmed the terrain. He didn't see Dallas or anything else in his frenzy to escape the Regiment assault.

DeWalt pulled Dallas forward, and the two men bolted for the

trees. Ilke broke out of Dallas's grasp and soared along at his side until they gained the shelter of the canopy.

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12

Eckhart whirled one way and the other, searching the darkness for the source of the voice that spoke to him. “Akkek! Where are you?”

“I told you I can’t let anyone see me,” she murmured. “I’m only free to wander around in the dark.”

“I’m supposed to get you out of here…but I don’t really need to, do I? You can leave whenever you want to, so why are you still in here?”

“That’s for me to know—me and Aistenz.”

Eckhart stiffened. “Aistenz! Why did he send me in here to throw my life away if you don’t need to be rescued?”

She chuckled in his ear. Her high, melodic voice reassured him. If she could laugh at a time like this, she must not be too badly off. “Aistenz doesn’t know why I’m in here, and you aren’t the first mercenary he’s sent in here to try to rescue me.”

Eckhart gulped. “Are they dead?”

She took a moment before she answered. “Some are. Some are still prisoners here.”

He groaned and cradled his head in his hands. “Let me guess. None of them have ever gotten out of here alive.”

“No, they haven’t, but not because I didn’t try to help them. The ones that died were stupid.”

“And the ones that are still here? Don’t try to tell me they’re here because they want to be.”

“The ones that are still here decided of their own free will to stay with me.”

Eckhart snorted. This conversation wasn’t making him feel better. If anything, it was confirming his worst fears. “Give me a break! No one would make that choice.”

“Maybe you’ll understand if I explain why I decided to stay instead of walking out the moment the Regiment locked me up.”

Eckhart pricked up his ears. “I’m listening. Why *are* you still here?”

She hesitated again. “I’ll only tell you if you give me your word of honor not to tell Aistenz. He can never know.”

“But you told these other mercenaries. How do you know I

won't decide to stay here, too?"

She laughed again. "You might."

"And I might have to tell Aistenz. I'm back in his service—for this job, at least. He also swore me to secrecy about telling anyone that I was working for him."

"You already told Gaemo you're working for Aistenz," she pointed out. "You already broke your promise."

"Gaemo is different."

She laughed again. "That's one way of putting it."

Eckhart's mind whirled. Whatever he expected from his first meeting with Akkek Stratha, this was definitely not it. "All right. I give you my word of honor. I'll never tell Aistenz why you decided to stay here."

"How much do you know about the Luminous Breath?"

Eckhart tensed. "The Luminous Breath—that's the diamond necklace you stole from Ohmar the Liar's tomb. It was part of the jewelry set you stole—the set that got you sentenced to this prison in the first place."

"That's the story the Immortals told the Regiment to pressure the Regiment into capturing me for them. I never stole any jewelry from Ohmar the Liar's tomb. I stole a treasure, but it wasn't jewelry."

"What was it, then? What could be that valuable that the Immortals would be so anxious to get it back?"

"The treasure never belonged to the Immortals in the first place. They stole it from someone else." She paused again, as though trying to decide whether to tell him after all. "They stole it from the Silent Death."

Goosebumps erupted on Eckhart's arms. Silent Death. Not many people knew much about them, except that they were one of the most feared criminal groups in the galaxy. Their atrocities and reprisals left the whole criminal world quaking in terror of crossing them.

"The treasure was a chemical," Akkek murmured in a barely audible undertone. "The Silent Death created it in a secret lab. The chemical was designed to disintegrate someone's constituent atoms enough that it could make them invisible—without actually killing them, that is."

Now it was Eckhart's turn to laugh. "Quit screwing with me. There is no such substance. It's scientifically impossible."

“Do you think so? What do you think about this?”

A fuzzy patch of space appeared at Eckhart’s left. He turned to look, but the spot was already moving.

It glided in front of him and took a position between himself and the bars. The bars, the cell block beyond, and the sleeping aliens across the way became watery and indistinct as though Eckhart was looking through a pool of clear liquid.

The blurry spot took the shape of a petite woman about four feet tall. In front of his eyes, the spot became less hazy, and she appeared before him. It was the same Akkek Stratha he’d seen in Aistenz’s personnel files.

She smiled down at him. She looked almost human…but not human. Her features revealed a tinge of the waxy, pointed character of the Shisax species. Long, straight brown hair almost covered the ears positioned too far down the sides of her head. Only the pointed tips showed between the strands.

Even when she became visible enough for him to see and recognize her, she remained partially transparent. He looked through her face and body to the cells and aliens across the way.

He gaped at her in blank disbelief, but his senses didn’t lie. She wavered in and out of visibility for a moment.

All at once, the bone-chewing monster across the cell block snorted in his sleep. Akkek vanished in a flash, and even the fuzzy blob disappeared.

“The Silent Death took technology and chemical data from Kruvin. They finished it in a secret lab and they planned to trade it to the Regiment, but the Immortals stole it first.”

Eckhart dropped his throbbing head into his hands again. He didn’t want to hear any more. He wanted to cease to exist.

He was in way, way over his head, and not because he was locked up in the Silvercloud Vault. This prison didn’t pose any danger to him near as bad as what she was telling him right now.

Kruvin. The name struck terror into Eckhart’s heart and sent creeping dread stealing over his skin at the same time.

He knew the Kruvin only too well. The Regiment had displaced the Kruvin from their homeworld, and they didn’t do it nicely.

No one knew the gory details better than Eckhart, because he’d been there. He’d been on the ground, in uniform with the Regiment. He’d helped the Regiment drive the Kruvin off their own planet to make way for a new Regiment station.

He'd resigned his commission immediately after that mission. He couldn't stomach the Regiment's doings—not if this was what the Regiment stood for.

He used his wages to buy the *Marathon* and he'd been a mercenary ever since. Five years later, he was proved right when the Regiment went after the Kruvin again.

The Regiment went to the planet where the displaced Kruvin had settled and where they were trying to rebuild their lives. The Regiment rolled in with a fleet of Colossus-class ships…and now the Kruvin were extinct. They no longer existed. The Regiment made sure of that.

Eckhart had earned himself a reputation on the fringes for being an honorary alien. He hated the Regiment as much as the fringe aliens. He had good reason to. He just didn't know the Regiment had another reason to get rid of the Kruvin.

"So." He didn't try to stop his voice from shaking. "How did the Silent Death get hold of the technology and the chemical formulas?" He wasn't sure he wanted to know, but he thought he already did.

"The Immortals weren't the only criminal organization who was dealing with the Regiment. The Regiment gave the Silent Death the rudimentary fundamentals. The Silent Death had the lab equipment, so the Regiment paid the Silent Death to produce the Luminous Breath."

"So why don't you want Aistenz to find out? Why did you decide to stay in this prison?"

"Because, Eckhart," she murmured, "I'm safe here. As long as the Regiment knows I'm in here, they won't try to kill me."

"Why would they want to kill you? They'll probably be extremely protective of you. You're the only one who can tell them where the Luminous Breath is. Isn't that why they locked you up? They want to get it back."

A puff of air brushed Eckhart's cheek. He felt her sit down on the bench next to him, even though he couldn't see her.

She whispered so low he had to strain to hear her. "Everyone thinks I hid it, but I didn't. I drank it. I *am* the Luminous Breath now. I'm the only living specimen who has ever taken it."

Eckhart already knew it before she said it. Didn't she just show him? She could turn invisible at will.

"Why did they wait a year and a half before they tried to interrogate you? Why did you stay in that cell where everyone

could see you?'

"They didn't wait. They interrogated me for six months before they put me in that cell."

Eckhart shivered again. He wanted this conversation to be over. He wanted to be a thousand light years away from this whole wretched job. He never should have accepted Aistenz's offer. He never should have gotten into this mess.

"There's more, Eckhart."

"Don't!" he moaned. "Don't tell me. I can't hear this."

"You have to hear, Eckhart. I'm sorry, but I need your help. You're the only one who can get us out of here now."

"Us! What are you talking about?"

"My friends. There are three other people here that have given up their freedom to protect the Luminous Breath. Aistenz hired them to come in here and get me, but their escape ships are all long gone. You have to get all of us out."

"Have to! Why do I have to?"

"What does Aistenz have on you, Eckhart? What did he offer you to convince you to come in here? You have to finish the job. We're all trapped in here. You're the only one who can get us out."

He groaned again and passed his hand across his eyes. "All right. Lay it on me. What's so important that you had to stay?"

"The Regiment had a secret lab under this prison. They've been doing more experiments. They've been coming up with all kinds of horror science projects to wipe out all the aliens on the fringes. They don't know which ones will work, so they've been hedging their bets by creating more than one."

Eckhart's mind flashed back to his meeting with Aistenz. The Trinity Code had infected DeWalt with a virus they planned to deploy against the alien population.

So the Regiment had more irons in the fire to get rid of all the pesky aliens. Eckhart never imagined the Regiment could be so evil.

"I've been sneaking down to the lab and watching what they've been doing. I've been stealing their creations, and my friends have been helping me put these weapons out of the Regiment's reach. That's why they stayed. That's why we all stayed. We had to make sure the Regiment didn't accomplish their aims."

"How did you do that?" Eckhart asked.

"They created three weapons, and I stole all three. My three friends helped me put the weapons out of reach."

“How?” Eckhart asked again.

She hesitated again. She waited a lot longer this time before she told him the truth. “They took them. Two of my friends infected themselves with viruses, and the third…”

Eckhart couldn’t stop shaking, but he knew he had to hear. He had to know everything.

“The third swallowed a substance that disintegrated his constituent molecules. It works the same as the Luminous Breath, but it doesn’t leave the subject alive. It’s a slow, agonizing death, and the Regiment wants to deploy this substance through the whole alien population. We had to get rid of it.”

Eckhart’s head hurt, and he found it hard to put his thoughts into words. “So you want to take these people out of here. You want to take them where the Regiment can’t get them and reclaim these…these weapons.”

“Exactly.”

“Why do you suddenly want to leave now? Why not recruit me to take one of these substances, too?” He laughed in hysterical misery at the very thought.

“The Regiment suspected there was a saboteur around the lab, or that something unexplained was going on. They posted security cameras, but they couldn’t pick up any sign of a break-in, so they moved the lab. The lab is gone, and there are no more substances to steal. They moved their operation somewhere else, but we’re still here.”

“Why not just let your friends die here? You poisoned them. Why not let the process run its course?”

“I never did anything to them, Eckhart,” she breathed. “They were all adamant about taking the substances. I tried to talk them out of it, but they insisted. This was the only way they could stop the Regiment from using these weapons. They did it to save the alien population.

“Now we have to get them out of here. As long as these people remain in prison, there’s always the chance the Regiment will figure out what’s happening and come back for them. We have to take these people off the planet. We have to take them somewhere they can die where the Regiment will never find them.”

“Why can’t you smuggle them out of the prison? Take them up to the surface and push them into the lava.” Eckhart gave another sick laugh. “I have to get out of here. This is insane.”

“You won’t do that, Eckhart,” she whispered. “I’m not the only one on the fringes with a reputation. You’ve done so much more than avoid harming the innocent and the defenseless. You’ve helped people. You’ve protected them. You’ve even put yourself in danger to protect them. You won’t leave. You’ll finish this job. You’ll get all of us to safety. I know you will.”

Eckhart shut his eyes and turned away, but he couldn’t escape her words. If she was telling even half of the truth, he couldn’t walk away.

She was right. He’d practically made a career out of sticking it to the Regiment and stopping them and the bigger criminal organizations from hurting or bothering civilians and the innocent.

He felt Akkek get up. She moved in front of him again, but she didn’t make herself visible. She rested her hand on his shoulder. “Dawn is coming, Eckhart. I have to go. Think about what I said. I’ll see you tomorrow night and we’ll come up with a plan.”

He looked up at where her face should have been. “Aistenz—does he already know? Is this why he sent me here to get you out? Did he know I would do this?”

“He knows about the three poisons. He doesn’t know about the Luminous Breath, and I don’t want him to know. If he did, the Regiment would go after him, too. They would capture him and make him tell them where it is.”

“Why did you tell me?” Eckhart asked. “Why me?”

Her voice softened. Was she smiling at him? “I guess I figured you had a right to know. If you’re going to help us escape, I figured you better know all the resources at your disposal. It’s only fair, right?”

He didn’t see any blur, so she must have gone completely invisible. He sensed her moving away from him toward the bars, and then she was gone. He was alone again in this cold cell.

He remained sitting on his bench for the rest of the night. He couldn’t sleep if he tried.

He’d come up with this plan based on the assumption that Akkek Stratha would be able to help him get her out of the prison. He just didn’t know she would be this able.

He’d originally planned to tell her to come out with him. She could walk past the guards. That part was easy.

It was the other three that gave him pause. How far along were they? Were they already dying? Would Eckhart have to carry them

out of the prison, or could they walk?

The first two infected themselves with viruses. Were they contagious? Would these friends of hers be falling to pieces?

What about the third one? She said the poison disintegrated the person's constituent molecules. The person might be dropping limbs all the way out of the prison.

Daylight swelled through the cell block. Eckhart didn't see how light got into this prison when it was so far underground, but that hardly mattered now.

The bone-chewer and the old shuffler across the way woke up and went back to their normal routine. Was either of them one of Akkek's friends?

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13

Dallas streaked through the trees, searching everywhere for his friends. Bing and Alice ran parallel to him, with Clifton and DeWalt staying close to each other on Dallas's other side.

Ilke raced along at Dallas's side. The black sphere of undulating tentacles tumbled through the air, but no lasers spouted from her here.

Regiment ships shrieked back and forth overhead. They spat jets of Datrium into the canopy, trying to hit the fugitives, but they ended up scorching the treetops instead. Splintered woodchips, smoldering leaves, and blobs of fire rained into the crew's path, but the cover gave them enough time to avoid the worst of it.

"How much farther?" Clifton yelled over at him.

"Less than a mile!" Dallas replied. "We have to cross an open field to reach the rocket."

"How exactly do we launch the rocket?" Bing asked.

Dallas glanced over at Alice. She glanced over at him at the same moment. Launching the rocket wasn't the problem.

The crew covered the last stretch of forest all too quickly, and Dallas spotted open ground ahead. Sunshine flooded the field. An open field was the last place in the galaxy Dallas wanted to be right now.

The others slowed their pace as they reached the forest's edge. When Dallas broke out into the field, the others accompanied him at the same time.

The rocket gleamed crisp and clean and shiny across the field. It rested on a concrete pad with the satellite capsule strapped to its fat sides. It was all ready to launch.

A steel shed sat across the field. That must be the launch station.

The Regiment attack force wheeled around the forest to cut the friends off. Dallas locked out his assault guns and raised them to aim at the Regiment ships. "Get to the rocket! Trigger the launch sequence!"

He opened fire on the nearest Banshee, and Bing and Alice bolted under his covering fire. Five ships pivoted around to face Dallas. They ignored Bing and Alice crossing the field for the shed.

Clifton and DeWalt closed on either side. A crackling fork of plasma erupted from the nearest ship and smashed into the ground right next to Clifton.

DeWalt lunged for his friend. “Go! Get to the rocket now!”

Clifton stumbled and then obeyed. He took off running to catch up with Bing and Alice, who skidded to a halt outside the shed.

Dallas didn’t see what they did next, and he didn’t care. He only had to distract the Regiment so Bing and Alice could start the launch sequence.

Dallas refused to think about what would happen if, by some miracle, the friends boarded the rocket and rode it into the atmosphere. Would Rixby still be near enough to pick them up before they all depressurized and died a grisly death? Dallas doubted it somehow.

He had bigger problems right now as a giant Colossus loomed over the forest and rumbled into the battle. The Banshees had to move out of its way to make room for the massive ship, but one Colossus had enough guns to make up for all the rest.

Dallas took a stand and aimed his guns at the Colossus’s giant underside. The ship’s belly blocked everything else. His assault guns seemed so puny by comparison.

The Colossus’s plasma ports boomed open and swiveled down to target him. No amount of armor could save him if that ship opened fire.

DeWalt sidestepped closer to Dallas and raised his rifle. The movement must have seemed more like a threat, because one of the ports spat a stream of plasma at DeWalt.

The shot ripped right through the banker’s chest, but as before, it didn’t damage him. The ship fired three more times with no effect.

Dallas sprayed his guns across the ship’s belly, but his weapons did no more damage than the Colossus did to DeWalt.

Banshees buzzed around the giant ship. A few of them popped off shots, and Dallas realized what he had to do.

He pushed DeWalt forward. “Run, DeWalt! Get to the rocket!”

“But…” DeWalt stammered.

Dallas didn’t listen. He and DeWalt ran under the ship’s shadow, but the Colossus couldn’t turn fast enough to follow them. The Banshees whizzed sideways and circled the Colossus to position themselves in their path.

Dallas checked on Bing and Alice. The shed door stood open, and Bing and Alice were nowhere in sight. Clifton stood guard, aiming his rifle at the Colossus. Bing and Alice must be inside the shed, hopefully setting off the launch sequence.

Dallas dashed across the field with plasma shots cracking into the ground all around him. DeWalt dropped behind him, and his ear-splitting shrieks told Dallas that Regiment ships were still shooting at him and not hitting him.

Dallas headed for the rocket. The Banshees swarmed in front of him and blocked him from reaching it, but that only played into his hands.

He raised one hand, and the assault gun slotted down into his wrist. It locked out of sight and a different tool popped out.

Dallas reached the edge of the concrete pad. The Colossus rotated to aim its plasma ports at him and at the rocket.

He whipped around, aimed his arm at the Colossus, and fired just as one of the Banshees came pelting across his view. A steel cable uncoiled from his wrist and the forked hook stabbed into the Banshee's hull.

Dallas dug in his heels as the ship went screaming past. It strained against the cable and his feet plowed up the sod, pulling him closer to the shed.

Clifton swept his gun in Dallas's direction, but the cable didn't hold the ship. The Banshee banked and headed back to destroy Dallas.

The black blur of Ilke's spinning form rocketed out of nowhere and hit the cable. She landed on the cable and the ball of whirling tentacles cartwheeled up it, making for the ship.

The Banshee unloaded on Dallas, and he crouched low under the bombardment. He held the cable taut with all his strength until Ilke reached the top.

She vaulted off the cable, somersaulted in midair, and collided with the ship. She flung out all her limbs and slapped against the ship's side in a splayed ring of clinging arms.

She grasped the hull with all her limbs except one and attacked the rear hatch. Her laser fired up and she started cutting through the side.

The Banshee ripped sideways and tried to turn around, but of course it couldn't hit her while she held onto its hull. The engines shrieked, and the ship veered wildly from right to left.

Dallas hung onto the cable for all he was worth. The engines fought against his grip and threatened to yank him off the ground, but he held firm.

The Colossus turned its gun ports on him and opened fire, but it couldn't get into a good position with the Banshee in the way. The giant monster ship pivoted around the stricken Banshee to get a better angle.

The massive Colossus wheeled over Dallas's head, and he bowed before the coming explosion. He stole one last peek toward the hatch to see Ilke tear it off. She flung it aside and disappeared inside the Banshee.

A plasma shot hit Dallas in the back, but he trained all his attention on the Banshee. It jerked and tossed at the end of the cable. Dallas could just imagine the pandemonium going inside with Ilke flying from deck to deck, gunning down everyone inside.

The Colossus unloaded on him, and he cowered down to make himself as small a target as possible. He couldn't stand under the barrage, so he focused all his strength on holding onto that cable.

The Banshee yanked and lifted him off the ground. He couldn't hold on much longer. He prepared to let go of his cable when a great whoosh of hot air flattened him.

He struggled to his knees to find DeWalt at his side again. DeWalt hauled Dallas to his feet. "Get up! We have to go!"

The Banshee was on the ground with its hatch hanging off. Ilke stood in the gap, waving everyone inside, while billowing clouds of burning gas huffed from the rocket.

Bing, Alice, and Clifton charged for the Banshee. Dallas released the cable and ran. He and DeWalt raced to the bridge, and Alice threw herself into the command chair where Eckhart usually sat.

"Get us out of here!" Clifton bellowed.

"Not yet!" Alice countered.

"What are you waiting for?" DeWalt asked.

Alice didn't answer. Bing crossed to the workstation where Rixby usually stood. "Fifteen seconds."

"We don't have fifteen seconds!" Another explosion from the Colossus cut DeWalt off.

"Seven seconds!" Bing reported.

"Fire up the engines to full power!" Alice ordered.

Bing attacked the controls. "The Colossus is targeting our weapons system."

“Activate Celdian shields!”

“Celdian activated. Three seconds.”

The crew stared at the front screen. Combusting gas clouds coming from the rocket changed to incandescent curls of fire. The rocket shuddered.

“The Colossus is diverting!” Bing cried. “The rocket is pointed at its life support array!”

“Go, go, go!” DeWalt shrieked. “Go now!”

“Stand fast!” Alice roared.

“The other Banshees are running for it!” Bing reported. “They’re fleeing and the order is going out to the other Colossuses.’

“Steady!” Alice ordered.

Dallas tightened his grip on the rail behind her chair. Clifton and DeWalt stood tense and breathless as the rocket detached from its scaffolding and started to rise.

“The Colossus is engaging its primary engines!” Bing hollered. “The rocket is on a collision course for its Datrium reserves.”

“All power to the shields!” Alice thundered and she punched the regulators to the wall.

The Banshee leapt upward with incredible speed. Dallas was too accustomed to the *Marathon*, but the ship wasn’t a Regiment Banshee anymore. Eckhart had modified it too many times.

This ship sprinted upward in a straight line, but the rocket was faster. It smashed into the Colossus and the rocket’s pointy tip punctured the Colossus’s outer hull. A catastrophic shockwave hit the Banshee, but the ship was already flying too fast.

The Banshee zoomed through the wave of flame on a breakneck course for outer space.

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14

Dallas strode down the corridor toward the galley and turned into the room. His scanners skimmed the walls, and he grunted in frustration when he didn't find what he was looking for.

He whirled away and almost trampled Ilke entering behind him. She sprang backward out of his path. "Whoa! What's your hurry? What's going on? What are you looking for?"

He swiveled around her and stalked off toward the cargo hold. "This ship—it's regulation Regiment."

"Yeah?" She hurried after him. "What's wrong with that? Everything's in the right place."

"That's the problem." He halted in the cargo hold and looked around. "Damn it!"

He spun back to the stairs, and she touched his arm to stop him. "Hey! What's wrong? We got away. We're all right."

"Get out of my way," he snarled, and barged back upstairs to the infirmary.

He would have continued his campaign through the ship, but she blocked him. "Easy, Dallas. Whatever it is, we can find it for you."

He commanded himself not to go off on her. She wasn't responsible for this. "I don't need you to find it for me."

"Maybe if I knew what you needed, I could get it for you." She eased closer to him and her sinuous limbs touched his armor. Her big eyes gazed up at him in their hypnotic way. "Let me help you. I want to."

"I need Datrium. My reserves are running low and this ship…" He almost cursed and stopped himself. "This ship doesn't have any apertures I can use to refuel. The *Marathon* has nutrient apertures in the galley, and Datrium apertures in the infirmary and in the cargo hold. Eckhart modified the ship for me when I went to work for him."

"Oh." She frowned and looked around. "I don't know what to do about that."

"There's nothing to do about it, but if I don't refuel in the next five minutes, I'll completely shut down. My life support functions

will quit and I'll be finished."

At that moment, Bing stuck his head out of the bridge door. "The *Marathon* is coming up on our scanners. Rixby responded to our hails. She's coming in to get us."

"Finally!" Dallas muttered and headed back down to the cargo hold. The emergency fuel alarm kept blaring inside his helmet. He'd never been this close to running out of fuel since he'd first got these prosthetics. He had to fuel up fast.

He reached the hold in time to hear a loud clang of metal against metal coming from outside the hatch. Ilke had hastily repaired it so the ship maintained pressure when it launched into space.

Dallas couldn't get the hatch open fast enough. He paced back and forth in front of it, counting down the seconds until it unlocked from the other side.

It purred open to reveal the *Marathon* backed up to the Banshee. Rixby stood at the joined hatches. She started to say, "I extended a life support envelope between…"

Dallas didn't listen to the rest. He ran to the Datrium aperture on the hull wall and locked his port onto it. He sagged in relief as Datrium flowed into his internal storage capacity chambers.

Rixby cocked her head to study him. "Are you okay, Dallas?"

"I'm fine now. Thank you for coming to get us, Rixby."

"We should keep this ship," DeWalt suggested when he, Clifton, and the others transferred to the *Marathon*.

Bing burst out laughing and clapped DeWalt hard on the shoulder. "Great idea. Let's all transfer to a ship with a homing beacon on board. The Regiment will be able to follow it right to your back door, Nancy."

"We can't keep it," Dallas told him. "We have to get as far away from that ship as we can before the Regiment finds us on it or near it."

"Should we blow it up?" Clifton asked.

"Why don't you just send up a giant flag and wave it back and forth shouting, 'Hey! We're over here! Come and get us!' Sheesh! You two are full of ideas, aren't you?"

Dallas turned to Alice. "Get up to the bridge and get us the hell out of here. We have to get back to Laloyama as fast as possible. We're already late to rendezvous with Eckhart."

"If he made it out of the prison in time for the rendezvous, he's

already dead. We'd be throwing our lives away by going back for him."

"We're going back," Dallas ordered. "Maybe he was late getting out and we'll be right on time to pick him up. We aren't leaving without at least checking."

Bing, Alice, and Rixby headed for the bridge and Dallas followed them to the stairs. DeWalt hustled up behind him. "How do you know the Regiment won't follow us to the prison? If they found us on Taio, they can find us at Laloyama, too."

"They won't follow us. They have no way of tracking us."

"Are you sure?" Clifton asked. "If they can't track us, how did they know where to find us? They knew exactly where we were at that depot."

"They didn't know where we were," Dallas replied over his shoulder.

"How do you explain them finding us so fast?" Clifton demanded. "They must have a tracking device planted on one of us —probably DeWalt."

Dallas stopped walking. He wasn't looking forward to this moment, but he couldn't avoid it any longer. He turned around to find the whole crew staring at him.

He'd never expected to be in a position where he had to replace Eckhart. Dallas had looked up to Eckhart for years. He always deferred to Eckhart in everything, and he hoped he always would.

Eckhart didn't have Dallas's strength or his enhancements or his weapons. Eckhart didn't need them, because Eckhart had something Dallas would never have. Eckhart had something no technology could replace. Eckhart had guts—guts and brains.

Dallas knew only one thing right now. He, Dallas, was partially responsible for this situation, and he had to solve it before Eckhart got back. Dallas just didn't know how he could possibly do that.

He braced himself for the confrontation of his life and took a deep breath. "The Regiment didn't know where we were. They never would have found us if someone didn't tell them where we were."

DeWalt gasped. "Someone told them! But…who?"

Dallas swiveled and turned his sensors to Ilke. She stood behind the rest of the crew, watching with her magically intriguing eyes. "Her."

"You rotten bitch!" Alice lunged down the stairs, but she

couldn't get past Dallas.

"I wondered where you went during the battle," Dallas murmured. "You contacted the Regiment. What reward did they promise you if you turned over DeWalt?"

A delicate smile played on her lips. "How could you believe that of me, Dallas? I thought we trusted each other."

He shook his head. "I guess I wasn't the only person who changed since we knew each other way back when."

She glided between Clifton and DeWalt. She eased right up close to Dallas and her many arms twined around him. "You don't really believe I could do something like this, do you, Dallas? You know how much I care about you. How can you believe I would put you in danger?"

He gazed down into her mesmerizing eyes. His scanners detected no change in her physiology, no heightened stress response, no nothing.

She looked as beautiful and captivating as ever when he looked at her, but her words told him a different story. He heard what she wasn't saying.

"I know you can't tell me an outright lie, so tell me the truth. Did you contact the Regiment? Did you tell them where we were in exchange for some reward for handing over DeWalt?"

Her lips turned up in a smile. Her cheeks blushed and her limbs tightened their grip on his body, but that grip didn't excite him the way it used to.

His armor blocked him from feeling the old rush of excitement and desire. In fact, he didn't feel her grip at all except when his sensors detected the increased pressure on his Crionium plates.

She raised one undulating limb and trailed it down the side of his helmet where his cheek used to be. He felt absolutely nothing from that touch.

"You know me too well, Dallas," she purred. "I never could fool you."

"That's it!" Alice spat. "We're gonna throw her out the hatch."

Dallas stood his ground. "No. We're not."

"The hell we aren't!" DeWalt took a menacing step forward. "She tried to kill me."

"We need her." Dallas turned back to Ilke. "I want your word you won't do anything to damage or sabotage the ship while we're en route."

“Of course not,” she simpered. “I don’t want to die, Dallas.”

“Say it,” Dallas ordered. “Give me your word you won’t interfere with our mission or the ship.”

She dipped her eyelashes over her glossy black eyes. “I promise, Dallas.”

“You can’t possibly think of believing her,” Clifton blurted out. “She’s a lying, stinking, traitorous—”

“She’s a traitor and an unscrupulous mercenary, but she isn’t a liar.” Dallas pulled away and took hold of one of Ilke’s arms. “Come with me.”

He led her to the infirmary and switched on the infectious quarantine field. A Celdian bubble appeared around Ilke and confined her there. She couldn’t leave it until someone on the bridge or outside the bubble deactivated it.

She smiled at him from inside. That smile rankled Dallas’s nerves. She felt no remorse at all for nearly getting them all killed. Her smile told him as much.

“You can’t leave her here,” Alice growled. “You should put her off the ship.”

“I agree,” Bing chimed in. “Let her flap her arms and fly back to Zuic by herself.”

Ilke only laughed.

“I’d like nothing better than to put her off the ship,” Dallas told them, “but we can’t do that without diverting from picking up Eckhart. We have to take her with us. We’ll turn her over to Aistenz Trotaer. He’ll know what to do with her.”

That wiped the smirk off her face in a big hurry. Dallas didn’t trust himself to do the right thing with Ilke. He would err on the side of being either too tough or too lenient. He needed Eckhart for decisions like this.

Aistenz would know exactly what to do with her in Eckhart’s absence. Aistenz didn’t stand betrayal from anyone, especially not when someone interfered with one of his people carrying out a job.

Dallas turned away. “We’ve wasted too much time on this already. Get back to the bridge and take us to Laloyama.”

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15

Eckhart got to his feet for the first time when Lashar brought his food. He approached the bars and she smiled at him, but he didn't smile back. "I need another favor, Lashar."

Her smile vanished. "I checked like you asked. There is no other place the guards take prisoners."

"Never mind that," Eckhart dropped his voice to a whisper. "How long does it take you to deliver the food to the whole prison block?"

"About four hours. Why?"

"Come back up here when you finish. Okay?"

She frowned. "Why?"

"Because I don't want you staying here when I'm gone. You stayed to keep an eye on me. I don't want you to regret that decision once I leave and you're still here."

"You're leaving?"

He waved her away. "Just finish delivering the food and come back up here. Understand?"

She wheeled her cart away, but not without casting several backward glances toward Eckhart. In a few minutes, she passed out of his view and went on delivering food boxes to the prisoners.

Eckhart put his own box on the floor and went back to his bench. He sat down in the same position, but he couldn't settle down. His heart raced and he fidgeted in anticipation. This was shaping up to be the longest day of his life.

When would Akkek come back for him? Where were her friends and what kind of condition would they be in when Eckhart finally met them?

Gaemo's hand extended in front of him and the alien goggled his eyes at Eckhart. "Hey—Eckhart! What's up?"

"Nothing," Eckhart lied. "What are you up to, Gaemo?"

"Just…you know…sitting around." Gaemo giggled. "There's never anything else to do around here."

Eckhart tried to turn his thoughts back to tonight. He hated waiting.

"Eckhart!" Gaemo called. "You want to know something funny?"

“Sure, Gaemo. What have you got?” Anything to pass the time until his big jailbreak.

“You see that big ogre across the block?”

Eckhart perked up. “Yeah. What about him?”

“He used to be about half that size,” Gaemo told him. “When he first came in, he was no bigger than you and me. He keeps getting bigger every year…and he used to eat regular food out of the box like the rest of us.”

Eckhart’s hair stood on end. “Is that so?”

“You betcha. He used to be able to talk pretty well, too. He told me he used to be a miner on Verus.”

“Did he tell you what he got sent up here for?” Eckhart asked.

“He wouldn’t talk about it. He said it was strictly confidential.” Gaemo laughed again.

Eckhart studied the creature more closely. So this creature got bigger every year. He used to be a normal guy and changed into a monster. What could cause that?

“Did he tell you his name?” Eckhart asked.

“Um…let me think. Oh, yeah. It was Zidriuq something… Oh, yeah! Zidriuq Chathov.”

Eckhart nodded to himself. That was definitely a Verun name. The story must be true.

Gaemo kept talking about the other prisoners and about the boring busy work he did to keep himself occupied in prison, but Eckhart didn’t listen. The creature gazed back at him.

A bell rang in the distance and brought Eckhart to his senses. It was the end of the day. The lights would switch off in a few minutes.

Eckhart got to his feet and paced around his cell, thinking fast. How long would he have to wait for Akkek to show up? He might have to wait all night.

Gaemo withdrew into his cell, and Eckhart didn’t call him back. He had more important things on his mind.

The lights clanged off and shadow fell over the block. Eckhart jumped at every sound, but he couldn’t stop pacing. Every second brought him closer to the big escape.

He was already a day behind his schedule. Would the *Marathon* crew be at the rendezvous point waiting for him? He and Akkek might be stranded inside an active volcano ready to blow.

The block darkened and the noise died. The prisoners stretched

out on their benches to sleep, but the big monster didn't.

The creature squatted on the floor, studying Eckhart with an unwavering gaze. If anything tipped Eckhart off that the creature was something important, that would have given it away.

After what seemed like an eternity but was probably more like an hour, Lashar returned. "What is it you need me for?"

"Good. You're here." Eckhart pressed his forehead to the bars. "Gaemo!" he hissed. "Gaemo—come here!"

"Leave me alone, Eckhart," Gaemo grumbled from deeper inside his cell. "I'm sleeping over here."

"Come over here unless you want to have a less than pleasant interview with Aistenz Trotaer!"

Gaemo muttered something impolite under his breath, and Eckhart heard him stumbling around in the cell next door.

"What is this?" Lashar whispered. "What are you doing with this alien?"

Gaemo stretched his hand in front of Eckhart's cell. "What do you want, Eckhart? Disturbing a fellow prisoner's sleep is strictly forbidden. You're gonna have to learn that if you stay here."

"I'm not staying here and neither are you, Gaemo. Unlock my cell."

Gaemo's fingertips stared at him. "I can't unlock it, Eckhart. I'm a prisoner here just like you."

Eckhart smacked his lips in annoyance. "Don't give me that shit, Gaemo. Unlock it now and don't piss me off."

Gaemo huffed under his breath. "I could get into a lot of trouble for this, Eckhart. I hope you know that. The prison officers don't take kindly to escape attempts."

"Would you rather deal with them or me?" Eckhart hissed.

Gaemo didn't answer. He stretched his fingertips toward the lock on Eckhart's bars and his fingers lengthened. He weaseled them into the lock and fiddled with it.

The lock clicked and Eckhart stepped out onto the scaffold. He was right. No weight-sensing alarm went off and no great security system locked down the whole prison to stop him from escaping.

"How did you do that?" Lashar breathed.

"We don't have any time to explain. Unlock your door, Gaemo."

Gaemo stared at him through the bars. The alien's body was small, squat, and dumpy. Two overly long arms came out of the top of it and two small, flat feet stuck out of the bottom of its body.

The eyes on the end of its arms blinked up at Eckhart. “I can’t, Eckhart!” Gaemo squeaked. “I can’t escape!”

“Unlock it, Gaemo,” Eckhart hissed. “Quit stalling. You’re coming with us.”

“I…I can’t. I don’t want to. I just want to—”

“We’re all risking our lives for you, Gaemo,” Eckhart snapped. “You knew this day would come. Now unlock that door before I have to do something you really won’t like.”

“I never signed up for this! I just want to live out my days in peace.”

“Well, you won’t. You’re dying. You agreed to take the poison for Akkek to keep it from the Regiment.”

“But…”

“Do you want the Regiment to get the poison back after your dead? Do you want your sacrifice to come to nothing? Do you really want to throw your life away because you’re too scared to leave this cell?”

A soft female voice murmured in Eckhart’s ear. “What’s going on here?”

“He won’t unlock his own cell,” Eckhart replied. “He’s scared.”

“You have to, Gaemo,” Akkek told him. “We talked about this.”

“Yeah, but…” Gaemo’s gaze skipped back to Eckhart, and Eckhart understood.

“Oh. I get it. He doesn’t want to go with *me*.”

“Why not?” Akkek asked.

“Because I’m…” Eckhart burst out laughing. “I’m a loose cannon.”

“That’s putting it mildly,” Gaemo grumbled.

“Unlock this door, Gaemo,” Akkek murmured. “That’s an order.”

Gaemo wilted before her, even though none of them could see her.

“Who’s speaking right now?” Lashar whispered.

“Don’t ask,” Eckhart told her.

Gaemo responded to Akkek’s order in ways he didn’t respond to Eckhart. He unlocked his own cell, but he still didn’t come out.

Eckhart glanced across the block. Sure enough, the monster was on his feet. He’d abandoned his bones and now gripped the bars in his huge furry hands. “Where’s the third mercenary?”

“Down here. Follow me.” Akkek’s voice started to retreat.

Eckhart rounded on Gaemo. “Go free your Verus friend, Gaemo.

If you hesitate for even a second, we're all dead. Do you understand? Throwing your own life away is one thing, but you can't go down with all our deaths on your head. Now go get your friend and meet us downstairs."

Eckhart turned his back on the little alien. He couldn't waste any more time on Gaemo.

He followed Akkek, who kept murmuring to him to guide him along the upper level. They halted in front of a cell, but it was too dark for Eckhart to see the prisoner inside.

Akkek moved in front of Eckhart and the lock clicked open. The bars swung back and left the way inside clear. "This is an old cell. The lock is easier to pick."

Eckhart barely heard her. He tiptoed into the cell trembling at what he was about to see.

The prisoner lay on her bunk and gazed up at the ceiling through milk-white eyes. Some glue-like substance smeared her lips and chin. Raspy wet breath crackled from her open mouth.

"She's barely holding on," Akkek whispered. "We have to get her out of the prison before she dies. If she dies in here, the prison doctors will turn her over to the Regiment for autopsy and they'll get the poison back."

Eckhart's stomach turned looking down into the colorless, bony face. "What's her name?"

"Menilia. She's a Silia."

Eckhart would never have recognized the prisoner's species if Akkek didn't tell him what she was. Menilia looked more like a corpse that someone pumped full of air to make her look like she was breathing.

He bent over her and murmured in her ear. "I'm going to pick you up, Menilia. I'm going to get you out of here."

She didn't respond when he wedged his arms under her. He was just about to pick her up when heavy footsteps shook the floor.

The bone-chewer shoved into the cell and shouldered Eckhart out of the way. The monster bent over Menilia and stroked her cheek with startling tenderness.

The creature's fur rustled when Akkek touched its elbow. "We have to go, Zidriuq. Come on."

The monster scooped up Menilia in one arm. The creature cradled her frail body and grunted something in a guttural undertone.

“I understand,” Akkek replied. “If it comes to that, we’ll all go together. We won’t leave anyone behind.”

Zidriuq shoved out of the cell and set off down the tier at a fast lope. “Come on,” Akkek murmured to Eckhart. “It’s time.”

He couldn’t see her, so he tried to catch up with Zidriuq. “We have to make our way back to Mount Graelges. That’s where my ship will meet us—if they come.”

“I knew it!” Gaemo groaned. “We’re all gonna die!”

“We’re going to die anyway,” Akkek told him. “The question is *how* we die.”

Lashar hustled up behind them. She bumped into Gaemo and pushed him closer to the group so Gaemo didn’t have a chance to fall behind. “You’re going to the volcano?”

“You don’t have to come with us,” Eckhart told her. “You have a good job here. If you want to stay, you can go back now and go on serving food to the prisoners. No one has to know you helped us.”

Her expression hardened. “If you’re going, I’m going.”

She stumbled over Gaemo again, and this time, she grabbed him by the arm. She forced him onward and the group raced to the stairs.

Zidriuq pounded down the steps much too loudly, but Eckhart gave up trying to make this an orderly escape. This ragtag group of whatnots wasn’t going to get out of here without bringing down the whole house.

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16

The fleeing prisoners made it all the way to the door leading from the cell block to the corridor through which Eckhart had entered this prison. He pushed ahead to reach it first, but Zidriuq elbowed him out of the way.

The giant creature planted his big, flat palm against the door and then pulled his hand back. Eckhart saw his worst nightmare about to unfold and lunged to grab Zidriuq's arm. "NO!"

He caught hold and tried to restrain the giant, but of course it didn't work. Zidriuq didn't even notice Eckhart hanging off him. Zidriuq flapped Eckhart's feet off the ground. He raised his arm and smashed the door off its hinges.

The door cartwheeled into the corridor beyond and a deafening clang echoed through the whole prison. An alarm blared into the silence and the whole cell block erupted in noise.

Eckhart pushed against the creature's back from behind. "Go! Run!"

Zidriuq tried to comply, and got stuck in the narrow opening. He took a full minute to wedge himself through, and even then, he had to struggle to get down the wire-mesh corridor.

Lashar, Eckhart, and Gaemo huddled behind him waiting for him to move. They couldn't do anything but cringe and wait for the axe to fall.

Zidriuq made it halfway down the mesh corridor before gunfire stuttered above their heads. It crashed through the wire grate and Eckhart ducked closer to Zidriuq, but Lashar and Gaemo retreated back into the cell block for cover.

Eckhart dove through and hauled both of them into the corridor. "Come on! We have to keep going!"

Bullets pelted down on the fugitives and several shots hit Zidriuq, but for some reason, they didn't damage him. They infuriated him instead.

He dropped Menilia to the floor and her body flopped onto her stomach. Zidriuq raised his arms over his head and bellowed to shake the prison. He grasped the wire that enclosed the corridor and yanked it apart with one tremendous rip.

The grate tore free from the scaffolding overhead and the whole structure tumbled, along with the armed guards stationed on the tiers. Bodies dropped out of the sky, and Zidriuq vented his rage by batting them into the walls.

Lashar and Gaemo tried again to pull back from the monster's rage, but Eckhart didn't give them a chance. He dragged them closer under Zidriuq's flailing limbs. Eckhart struggled to keep his new friends as close to the monster as possible. It was the safest place to be right now.

The gunmen still stationed above paused their fire when they saw their comrades' fate. An officer appeared and pointed down. "Fire, men! Fire!"

The guards raised their guns and Eckhart reacted on pure instinct. He dashed around Zidriuq and grabbed the creature's arm. "Come on! We have to get to the volcano! It's the only way out."

Zidriuq understood him and barreled to the end of the corridor where another door blocked their way. The monster tore that one off as easily as the first. No one had to worry anymore about raising the alarm.

Eckhart tried to pick up Menilia, but before he succeeded, Zidriuq came back and knocked him aside. Zidriuq started to pick her up instead when another squad of guards swarmed through the open door.

They sprayed gunfire down the corridor. Lashar and Gaemo both screamed and flattened themselves to the floor. Eckhart dropped, too, but he didn't really need to.

Zidriuq thundered in fury and expanded to his biggest size. His body swelled and he stretched out both arms. He covered the whole corridor and all the gunshots stuck him in the chest.

To Eckhart's amazement, the shots didn't harm him at all. They punched into his chest and left him unscathed.

Zidriuq charged the enemy, but before he could reach them, more guards flooded into the corridor. These ones carried pounders and their guns boomed into Zidriuq's massive chest.

The creature staggered a few steps backward and Eckhart feared the worst, but when he looked up, he froze at what he saw. A fuzzy blur wavered around the guards, moving impossibly fast.

The wave of transparent space swirled from one guard to the next and their guns turned on their own comrades. Rifles fired into their neighbors' heads and the guards toppled by the dozen.

Eckhart scrambled over to Menilia, but when he tried to pick her up for the third time, she squirmed in his arms. She twisted onto her side and raised herself up on one elbow.

Her ghastly features contorted as her face came alive in a mask of grisly living death. She turned her skeletal head toward the guards, opened her mouth, and screamed.

No sound came out, though. Instead, a rush of Datrium plasma poured from her parched lips and scorched the guards alive. Incredibly, the plasma swirled around Zidriuq and didn't touch him.

The guards still standing went up in a towering pillar of fire. Lashar and Gaemo both screamed at the sight, but Eckhart couldn't move. He didn't want to believe it.

Someone invisible grabbed him. "Get up!" Akkek yelled in his ear. "We have to move."

He stumbled to his feet and picked up Menilia. She weighed nothing, and she went limp in his arms.

Zidriuq stormed to the door, and this time, he didn't try to wedge his body through. He smashed into the frame and shattered concrete and steel with his giant size.

He plunged through the debris and barreled down another corridor—a stone one this time. Akkek became visible at Eckhart's side, and she hurried forward to steer Zidriuq to the left. "This way! We're going this way."

She wound through several labyrinthine passages and stopped at many doors. Eckhart didn't see what she did to them, but she magically opened them without even trying.

Eckhart lost track of where they were going. They wound deep into the prison, and they only slowed down to make sure Lashar and Gaemo kept up.

Akkek paused at another door like so many others. She glanced back and surveyed the group. "This is it. We're going out into the crater."

"Do you have any way to contact your ship?" Lashar asked.

Eckhart shook his head. He had no way of knowing if the *Marathon* would even come for him, but he couldn't bear to tell these people that.

"As soon as we get outside, the guns will open up," Akkek told them. "The gun placements around the crater are motion-activated, so we'll just have to dodge them and do our best to break through to the lava pit."

Lashar gulped. “Lava pit?”

“Ships come down the main funnel and dock on the landing platform. A heat shield protects the platform for anyone disembarking, but with the alarm triggered, the guns will cover the platform. We’ll have to get past the guns, but we won’t be able to go into the funnel itself. If the ship is there, it will have to come down onto the platform.”

Eckhart stiffened when she turned the doorknob. This was the moment of truth. No more talking. No more running.

She pushed the door open and her visible form blurred as she became transparent again, but that wouldn’t help her against the big guns.

She dove through and Eckhart followed, but when he tried to get onto the platform, Zidriuq stopped him. He slammed his massive arm into Eckhart, brought Eckhart to a halt, and took Menilia out of his arms.

There was no time to argue. Zidriuq whirled away and plowed into the open. Lashar and Gaemo crowded close behind Eckhart as the three friends exploded onto the platform.

True to Akkek’s word, giant pounders erupted from the walls rising to the mountain’s main funnel. Explosions rocked the platform as missiles and plasma jets blasted into the floor.

Eckhart circled his arms around Lashar and Gaemo, trying to guide them out of harm’s way. Shots smashed the platform, ripping up the pavement underfoot.

Eckhart dodged and sprang here and there, doing his best to shove Lashar and Gaemo toward the walls, but he already saw that wouldn’t help. The guns covered every inch of the platform from one side to the other.

Zidriuq crossed the platform the fastest. He gained the other side and laid Menilia on the ground, out of the guns’ range. Zidriuq came racing back, scooped Gaemo off the floor, and took off with him.

Eckhart shrank back as another blast split the floor at his feet. He pushed Lashar out of the way, but when he looked up to check the guns’ aim, he spotted a ship descending down the funnel. His heart leaped when he recognized the *Marathon*.

He seized Lashar. “The ship is here! We can make it!

The ship floated down the funnel with lava licking all around it. The ship’s guns pivoted right and left, and Datrium spouted from

the gun ports. One pounder after another detonated and left a clear path to the landing zone.

Akkek materialized ahead of them. The platform dwindled into a narrow pathway barely wide enough for a person to walk on. It eventually vanished into a river of lava.

She waved the ship down and the hatch opened. The ship rotated backward and the big pounders deflected off the Celdian shield.

Eckhart could have cried in happiness when he spotted Dallas and Bing in the cargo hold. They gestured for Akkek to jump on board.

She vaulted the gap, and Bing grabbed her. She vanished inside the ship, and Eckhart breathed a ragged sigh of relief. He'd done it. She was free.

If he went down now, the crew could take her to Aistenz's safe house. Aistenz would give them Eckhart's payment and destroy the Oksite crystal.

He guided Lashar forward, and Zidriuq carried Gaemo the rest of the way to the ship. Lashar rushed aboard, and Zidriuq returned to pick up Menilia.

The *Marathon*'s guns shot plasma all over the place to protect their escape. A few pounders still remained outside the ship's range, but they couldn't hit the fleeing crew.

Zidriuq picked up Menilia. Eckhart retreated to take refuge inside the ship when one of the pounders swiveled upward and fired into the wall above their heads.

A massive boulder split from the cavern wall and smashed down on Zidriuq's head. Akkek screamed through the hatch. "Zidriuq—NO!"

The monster staggered, tried to correct, and went down. He stumbled and tipped headfirst into the lava flow.

Akkek lunged past Eckhart, trying to reach her friends. Eckhart barely roused himself in time to grab her and hold her back.

Her screams ripped his brain in half. Eckhart couldn't move. He could only stare at the spot where Zidriuq and Menilia had disappeared.

Akkek jerked and spasmed in his arms. Her screams broke into full-throated cries. "No!"

"Come on!" Eckhart yelled to her over the noise. "It's done! No one can touch them now."

Her sobs shook him. She expressed all the grief in his heart for these two brave souls who would never come back.

He wrestled her up the hatch ramp, but when he put his foot on the grate, someone passed him going the other way. Gaemo waddled down the ramp and gazed down into the lava where Zidriuq and Menilia had disappeared.

“Don’t do this, Gaemo!” Eckhart choked. “You don’t have to do this.”

Gaemo rotated one of his arms behind him to look at Eckhart and Akkek. “It’s better this way.”

“No, Gaemo!” Akkek wailed. “Don’t do this! Don’t leave me alone!”

His eyes softened at the end of his fingers. “Where would I go? I would never be safe. I could never live in peace.”

“We’ll protect you,” Eckhart blabbed. “We’ll take you to Aistenz, Gaemo. He’ll find a safe place for you. You can live the rest of your life in peace. It doesn’t have to end this way.”

“Tell him,” Gaemo murmured. “Tell him, Eckhart. Promise me you’ll tell him.”

Eckhart’s throat constricted. He recognized hopelessness when he heard it. “Tell him what, Gaemo?”

“Tell Aistenz…” Gaemo turned to stare into the lava. “Tell him I did my job.”

Gaemo leaned forward and fell. The lava blooped around him, and he didn’t resurface.

Akkek shrieked once and burst into even more heart-rending sobs. There was nothing left.

Eckhart wrestled her away. Dallas and Bing grabbed them both and pulled them through the hatch. It closed and the *Marathon* lifted upward toward the safety of black space.

Next stop was Aistenz’s safe house and the promised destruction of the Oksite crystal.

The galaxy – and the aliens on the fringe – would be safe from its destructive potential.

As Eckhart looked at the anguish on Akkek’s face, it felt like the hollowest victory of his life.

Worst still, Aistenz’s words rang in his ears. *One job always leads to another…*

Deep down, he sensed nothing was over yet.

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TRAPPED

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1

Adam Eckhart pushed past his friends, sprang up the stairs three at a time, and burst onto the bridge, but he didn't rush to his seat. Alice was already sitting in it.

"I thought we were clear."

"It's never that easy."

"Can you get out of here?" he asked.

"Not likely," she muttered through her gas mask. "The Silvercloud Vault rolls out the welcome mat for you on the way in. Then the big guns take their pound of flesh on the way out."

The bridge tactical web glimmered in the shadows. It laid out a view of the mayhem outside the *Marathon*. A vast river of lava rippled and oozed beyond the landing platform inside Mount Graelges' main volcanic funnel. Clouds of molten gas and lava plumes licked the ship's nose.

"The heat shield is barely holding," Rixby reported from her perch atop of her workstation across the bridge. The furry little alien turned from one side to the other, punching buttons at her feet.

"There are ion disrupters positioned all along the inside of the funnel, and the heat shielding won't protect us from them. We'll be flying straight into them if we try to leave, and the Celdian shielding is at 50% and falling."

Eckhart didn't answer. Alice had gotten the *Marathon* inside the volcano to rescue him and Akkek Stratha from the Silvercloud Vault prison. Now this was Alice's show to get them out of here alive… if it was even possible.

She lifted off the platform, and the ship eased upward toward the crater. The hull vibrated from the heat radiated from the lava pit, and an alarm squealed on the regulators.

Alice didn't take her sightless eye sockets off the tactical web in front of her. Her bony arms twisted the regulators from side to side. The ship pivoted to target the last two pounders defending the loading platform.

No sign remained down there to show Eckhart where the three heroic mercenaries had fallen into the lava. They'd sacrificed their

lives to protect the fringe aliens from the Regiment's evil plot to wipe out the entire population.

Eckhart had gotten away with Akkek Stratha, the last survivor. Now he just had to figure out how to get her back alive so he could get paid for this job.

The pounders followed the *Marathon*'s trajectory. "Why aren't they firing?" Eckhart murmured. "Something's wrong."

"Ion disrupters on the main funnel walls are pivoting downward to target us," Rixby chirped.

"No time like the present," Alice growled, and slammed the regulators all the way back.

The ship tilted violently and vaulted straight up at a steep angle. It whizzed headlong for the funnel's end, where the mountain opened into the atmosphere. The engines roared, cycling up to full power.

The ship flew straight into the path of all those ion disrupters, and the two pounders opened up to join in. Crushing booms rocked the hull from all sides as the ship flew headfirst into a rain of blasts.

The first volley smacked the ship downward almost as fast as it soared upward. The engines shrieked from the strain, and Alice wrestled the regulators to keep the ship on course through the assault.

The ion disrupters didn't stop at keeping the *Marathon* from escaping. As soon as they opened fire, they rotated downward and continued pummeling the ship with countless blasts to drive the *Marathon* lower toward the lava.

"The heat shielding is holding," Rixby cried above the noise, "but it can't withstand contact with the lava. Celdian is at 25% and every shot drives us lower. If we don't break through, we'll fall into the lava in four minutes."

Alice didn't answer. She yanked back the ship's guns and unloaded on the funnel walls. Plasma jetted from the *Marathon*'s weapons ports and smashed dozens of ion disrupters. Shattered gun parts and splintered rock cracked loose, only to bombard the Celdian shielding with as many punishing blows as the guns had just unleashed.

"Celdian at 15% and falling fast!" Rixby shrieked.

Alice's breath husked through her gas mask. Eckhart resisted the urge to rush her chair, rip her out of it, and take over himself, but he could see she was already doing everything possible. Her spindly

arms jerked the regulators from side to side, and a continuous curtain of Datrium plasma spurted from the guns. She hammered the ion disrupters with everything the *Marathon* had, but it still wasn't enough.

More ion disrupters farther up the funnel added their firepower to the destruction, forcing the ship down to the landing platform. The ship hovered inches above the lava.

"Celdian at 5%!" Rixby squealed. "We can't hold out any longer."

Another blow smashed the ship's flank, and the starboard wing dipped. It touched the lava flow and a second alarm joined the first.

"Hull breach above the main Crick centrifuge!" Rixby cried. "We're losing pressure!"

Eckhart opened his mouth to say something. What *could* he say?

Alice snarled under her breath and veered the ship right and left, trying to dodge both the ion disrupter shots and more debris drumming the hull from above, but it was no good.

Eckhart took a step forward, but at the moment when he prepared to take over, someone brushed his elbow. He glanced down as Akkek passed him. She reached Alice's chair first.

Akkek placed her small, delicate hand on the regulator, and the noise stopped instantly. Eckhart stared into the tactical web as dozens of ion disrupter shots streaked down the funnel…and then passed straight through the *Marathon*.

Alice gaped at the sight and then spun around to stare at Akkek. "What did you *do*?"

"I transferred my molecular disintegration to the ship. The guns can't touch you now. We can leave when you're ready."

Alice didn't react right away. She, Eckhart, and Rixby all stared into the tactical web. More shots and massive boulders rained down on the *Marathon* from above, but they didn't hit the ship. They flew right through it.

"You'd better go," Akkek murmured. "If anyone comes, they'll see what's happening, and they'll figure out I'm on board."

Her voice startled Alice, who jerked the regulators back and gunned the engines, but she didn't fly at top speed.

The *Marathon* lifted, and Alice flew out of the funnel at a steady pace. The ion disrupters swiveled upward to track the ship out of the crater. They continued their assault until the ship soared out of the funnel into the atmosphere, but not one of those shots damaged

the ship. They didn't even touch it.

Alice picked up speed as the ship cleared the mountain's rim. The *Marathon* flew over the vast lava oceans of Laloyama.

"Dallas is sealing the hull breach," Rixby reported. "I'm using Aistenz Trotaer's contacts on Banok to arrange resupply of Celdian."

"Load up the Celdian and then set course for Pheste. Alert Aistenz that we have Akkek on board." Eckhart turned to study the petite female he'd just rescued from prison. "Are you okay?"

She dropped her hand from the regulators, and the tactical web flickered off. She nodded at the floor and a tear streaked down her cheek.

He touched her shoulder. "Come down to the infirmary with me. I want to make sure none of these strange substances is affecting your health, and I need to check on Lashar."

He left Alice in control of the bridge. He would have to talk to her later.

Eckhart steered Akkek off the bridge, and she followed him into the corridor. He wasn't really worried about her physical health. She'd stolen this mysterious molecular disintegration weapon from the Silent Death criminal syndicate years ago. She'd drunk the stuff to hide it from them and to stop the Regiment from taking it back. She'd been living with it ever since. She had been using it to hide from the prison wardens ever since her capture. It had never harmed her.

Eckhart was more concerned with her mental state after losing her three closest friends in a matter of minutes. He also wanted to question her more about how the weapon worked and how he should proceed when he turned her over to Aistenz Trotaer, another crime lord, who'd hired him to break her out of prison.

He wasn't as pleased as he might be when Rixby waddled off the bridge to follow them. He was hoping to talk to Akkek in private. She'd be more willing to talk to him without a bunch of strangers hanging around listening.

He paused when he got near the infirmary and noticed Dallas and Bing approaching to meet him. Now he definitely wouldn't get any alone time with Akkek. "Is the hull breach sealed?"

Dallas nodded, but it was Bing who answered. He cracked one of his cheesy grins. "I forgot to tell you. We have a problem."

"Just one?" Eckhart teased. "We should be able to handle that. As long as the number of problems doesn't exceed thirty or forty."

His two friends kept gazing at him. They didn't take him up on the joke, even though Bing kept grinning like a fool. Eckhart couldn't read Dallas's expression through his helmet.

"So?" Eckhart prompted. "What's the problem?"

Dallas waved toward the infirmary, and Eckhart glanced inside for the first time. Ilke, the Mozari assassin and a member of the Bloody Blossoms sisterhood, stood inside an infection containment field erected in the middle of the infirmary.

She smiled at him from behind its electromagnetic field. "Good morning, Eckhart. It's lovely to see you back safe and sound."

"What the hell is going on here?" Eckhart demanded.

"She sold us out to the Regiment," Bing replied. "She called them in to kill us all in exchange for some reward for turning in DeWalt."

Eckhart's gaze snapped to Dallas, but his friend stood impassive and unresponsive. Dallas stared straight ahead without acknowledging anyone. He pretended Ilke wasn't there. He pretended no one was there.

"Alice wanted to throw her off the ship," Rixby told Eckhart. "Dallas stopped her, though."

"He only stopped her because dealing with Ilke would have slowed us down," Bing corrected. "He wanted to get to Laloyama and pick you up before we dealt with her."

"I'm so glad you're back, Eckhart," Ilke purred in her silkiest voice. "You won't throw me off the ship, will you, not after the way I saved your life on Zuic 7HP9? You owe me one, Eckhart. I could have let you die, but I threw myself in front of you and almost got killed instead."

"Dallas wants to hand her over to Aistenz," Bing went on. "Telling her he's going to let Aistenz deal with her is the only way to shut her up."

Mentioning Aistenz didn't bother Ilke now. She kept smiling at them all in that saccharine way of hers.

Eckhart sensed himself falling under her magical spell again, but the quarantine field protected him from her wrapping her sinuous limbs around him. Somehow, her charms didn't produce the same mind-bending effect without that. He checked Dallas' reaction again, but his friend remained immovable and unresponsive behind his mask.

Eckhart would have liked to question Dallas about all this, but

he couldn't do that in front of the others, either. He respected Dallas too much to humiliate him in front of everyone, which was what talking about Ilke would do.

"What do you want to do with her?" Rixby asked.

Eckhart started to reply, although he still had no idea what to say. He couldn't think of any punishment bad enough to pay her back for what she'd done to his crew.

At that moment, a broken scream interrupted their conversation. "Help me! Somebody help me!"

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2

Eckhart, Dallas, Bing, and Akkek raced to the stairs to find Blake Clifton at the base of them. He half-supported, half-carried his boss Coleman DeWalt, holding one of DeWalt's arms slung around his shoulders. DeWalt sagged in Clifton's arms, and anyone could see something was seriously wrong with the Earthling banker.

Clifton tried to hoist DeWalt up the stairs, but failed. DeWalt slipped out of his friend's grip and flopped to the floor. Clifton tried to pick him up, but DeWalt's dead weight didn't cooperate.

Eckhart and Dallas reached the pair at the same time. Dallas picked up DeWalt. "He's burning up," Dallas murmured. "I'm reading his internal body temperature and it's off the charts!"

"Get him up to the infirmary," Eckhart ordered.

Dallas carried DeWalt up the stairs with Clifton right on his heels. Clifton fired a thousand questions over Dallas's shoulder. "What's wrong with him? He was fine right up until we left the volcano. Then he just collapsed on the floor at my feet."

"He's been reading an elevated body temperature since you two first came on board the *Marathon*," Eckhart told him. "He should have collapsed a long time ago."

"How is that even possible?" Clifton asked. "He's been fine ever since we left Earth."

"Not exactly," Dallas interjected. "He wasn't fine on Taio, was he?"

Bing snorted. "That's one way to put it."

Dallas laid DeWalt on one of the exam tables, but Bing didn't move in on the patient the way he usually did when someone on the *Marathon* crew got hurt. Instead, he stood off to one side with Eckhart, Dallas, and Clifton. They all regarded DeWalt, who curled into the fetal position as soon as Dallas put him down. He shook all over, and sweat saturated his hair.

Eckhart noticed for the first time that DeWalt's clothes were shredded to thin strips, but other than that, he appeared unharmed.

"I don't know what to do for him," Bing murmured. "I don't want to give him any Eplite until we know what's wrong with him. It might kill him…or make him worse."

Rixby crossed the infirmary and started working on the medical equipment. “The ship’s internal scanners are detecting DeWalt’s body temperature. It’s even higher than it was before. He won’t survive this.”

“What happened on Taio?” Eckhart asked. “What was wrong with him?”

“Nothing was wrong with him, as long as you don’t count being bulletproof,” Bing replied.

“He wasn’t bulletproof,” Dallas corrected. “He was…invincible.”

“I don’t understand,” Eckhart said. “How do you mean?”

“The Freilo separatists fired their rifles right into his chest and the bullets didn’t harm him,” Dallas replied. “They fired hundreds of times. The bullets vanished inside him without doing any damage.”

“Maybe that’s why he’s cracking up,” Bing joked. “Maybe he’s allergic to bullets.”

No one paid any attention to his jokes. “And then, when the Regiment attacked, the rockets and plasma shots didn’t harm him, either,” Dallas went on. “He ran straight into a plasma storm to save me. They didn’t even mess up his hair.”

“Though they did do a number on his clothes,” Bing finished.

“Ilke said he had a virus,” Eckhart pointed out. “No virus could do that.”

“It *is* a virus.” Akkek spoke up for the first time, and everyone spun around to stare at her. “It’s a gene modification retrovirus created by the Regiment. It’s the same virus they gave Zidriuq Chathov. Bullets didn’t harm him, either.”

Eckhart strode over to DeWalt. The banker shuddered on the exam table, and his bleary eyes didn’t register Eckhart standing right in front of him. “Is this virus contagious? Do we have to worry about anyone else getting it?”

“No,” Akkek replied.

“Yes,” Rixby interjected from her workstation. “Someone else has it.”

Eckhart turned to face her. “Who is it?”

She turned and waved her antennae up at him. “Me.”

“You?” Eckhart gasped. “There’s nothing wrong with you.”

“My body temperature is elevated.” She waved toward the medical equipment she’d just been working on. “It’s right there on the scans.”

Eckhart crossed to her side. Sure enough, the internal scanners registered the life signs of everyone on board.

Rixby's body temperature read double the normal range for a Lemaria, but the heightened temperature didn't affect any of her other body systems. It should have killed her, but she was otherwise perfectly well.

"What about the rest of us?" Bing asked. "Is it going to spread through the whole crew? Are we all going to end up like DeWalt?"

"It shouldn't have spread to anyone," Akkek countered. "It was designed to be taken internally. Only someone who drank the solution containing the virus should have been able to acquire the protection."

"What else do you know about the virus?" Eckhart went back to DeWalt, but he hesitated to touch the banker. "Does it work the same way by disintegrating molecules and atoms?"

"I don't know how it works. I stole it, and Zidriuq volunteered to drink it. It made him grow. It turned him into a monster."

"Well, that's something to look forward to," Bing quipped. "So we'll have a crew of monsters running around."

"He wasn't a monster," Eckhart countered. "He was compassionate and intelligent to the end."

"He wound up taking a swan dive into a molten volcanic lava pit," Bing finished. "It sounds like a happy fate."

Dallas clapped him on the shoulder. "You're in luck, pal, because you aren't infected with the virus."

"None of you is," Rixby replied. "I'm the only one."

"Lemaria must be susceptible to it in ways other species aren't," Akkek surmised.

"Do you hear that, Rixby?" Bing called. "We always knew you were special."

"What can you do for DeWalt?" Eckhart asked. "If we can find a way to cure him, we'll know what to do when Rixby starts getting sick."

"There shouldn't be anything wrong with him," Akkek replied. "The virus didn't cause Zidriuq any problems."

"Except to turn him into a monster," Bing corrected.

"And double his size," Eckhart finished.

"We have to do something." Clifton came to DeWalt's bedside. He alone of the whole crew rested his hand on DeWalt's shoulder in a comforting gesture. "We can't let him die."

“We don’t know that he’ll die,” Rixby told him. “So far, it isn’t affecting any of his organ systems. He’s in perfect health.”

“You call *this* perfect health?” Clifton fired back. “He’s a wreck.”

“He’s shaking and sweating.” Rixby made another check of the scanners. “All his vital signs are normal, apart from elevated temperature. All his organ systems are functioning normally. There’s nothing wrong with him. I’m sorry, Clifton, but there’s nothing we can do.”

“Then I agree with Bing,” Eckhart added. “We shouldn’t do anything. Giving him anything or trying to intervene might harm him.”

“So you’re all going to just stand around and watch him suffer?” Clifton’s wild eyes skipped from one face to another. “Some friends you turned out to be.”

“I just said we wouldn’t do anything to harm him,” Eckhart began. “If there’s any way we can help him, we’ll do it.”

His words bounced right off Clifton, who alternately glared at the crew in seething resentment and gazed down at DeWalt in fearful concern.

“He looked terrible,” Akkek told him. “He might even look like he’s dying, but if Rixby is right, maybe he’ll come out of it eventually. Maybe this is just a side effect and DeWalt will adapt to it in time. Zidriuq lived with the virus for years.”

Clifton didn’t answer. He passed his hand across DeWalt’s forehead and pushed his sweat-drenched hair out of his face.

“Boral?” A faint, husky voice startled everyone into turning around again.

Lashar, the female Yakit that Eckhart had met on the prison transport, stood in the infirmary door. Bing gasped. “Lashar! Is that you?”

She burst out laughing and rushed into his arms. They hugged, and Bing started laughing, too. “I never thought I’d see you again!”

She stood back and held him at arm’s length. “Are you really mixed up with this band of rogues?”

“He’s the biggest rogue on board,” Dallas cut in.

“What are you doing here?” Bing asked. “What were you doing in the Silvercloud Vault? Did you become a notorious outlaw after I left Xirrek?”

She laughed. “I stayed to keep an eye on your captain.”

“Captain!” Bing frowned. “We don’t have a captain.”

“She means me,” Eckhart interrupted. “She saved me on the Kadrok prison freighter, and she stayed to babysit me. I couldn’t leave her behind.”

Lashar and Bing hugged again. “Where will you go now? Will you go back to Xirrek?’

“No, never.” Lashar glanced over at Eckhart. “Did I hear you say you would stop off at Banok? I’ll go there.”

Bing took hold of one of her arms. He gazed into her eyes with such fond regret, and his smile became wistful and almost innocent. “I wish you could stay longer.”

“Two Yakit on board would only get in each other’s way. Now I’m going down to your galley. I’m hungry.”

Bing smiled in ecstasy, watching her leave the infirmary. “It’s a good thing she isn’t staying,” he remarked after she was out of earshot. “We’d take up all our cargo space with food if both of us stayed on board.”

“Only because you eat more than the rest of us combined,” Rixby told him.

“Are you sure you’re feeling okay?” Eckhart asked her. “I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

“The virus seems to affect each species differently, but at the moment, I feel fine. If I start having problems, you’ll be the first to know.”

“I guess I’ll have to be satisfied with that.” Eckhart turned back to DeWalt. “Maybe someone on Banok knows what to do about this.”

“No one Banok knows what to do about this,” Akkek told him. “No one in the whole galaxy even knows about the virus. Everything going on in that lab was top secret.”

“How do you explain the Regiment getting a sample of the virus all the way back to Earth?” Eckhart asked. “Why would they infect DeWalt, of all people? It wasn’t like he was going into battle or anything.”

“Maybe they wanted to test it on a purely Earthling subject. Why would they create this virus unless they wanted to create a whole breed of indestructible Earthlings? The Regiment must have planned to use the virus on Earthling Regiment soldiers. The fringe aliens would never be able to kill them in battle. It’s the perfect solution.”

“So what are we supposed to do?” Eckhart asked. “Just let it run

its course?"

Akkek shrugged. "That's all we can do."

Eckhart looked back and forth between DeWalt and Rixby. The little alien waved her antennae at him in that inspecting way. She was studying him as intently as he was studying her.

He didn't want to lose either of these people to some cockamamie virus the Regiment had cooked up in one of their ultra-secret underground labs, but he dreaded losing Rixby a hell of a lot more than DeWalt.

Thinking about it wracked his nerves. What would his crew be without her? What would *he* be without her?

"Don't worry, Eckhart," she squeaked. "If my condition changes, you'll be the first to know."

"Swell," he grumbled. "That's just swell."

Bing clapped his hands and rubbed them together. "Wonderful. So it's back to business as usual."

"Not exactly." Eckhart turned to Clifton. "I'm afraid I have to put an infection containment field around DeWalt, too. I can't risk this thing spreading to the rest of the crew."

"That's nonsense, Eckhart," Dallas interjected. "DeWalt has been on board for weeks. Anyone he might infect has already been infected long ago."

Eckhart threw up his hands. "Fine. Everybody get back to work. We'll land on Banok in a few hours. If anyone wants to get out and see the sights, now's your chance."

"What about me?" Akkek asked. "I suppose you want me to stay hidden."

"Why? You can just disguise yourself. No one will know who you are."

She smiled up at him. "Oh, yeah. I forgot."

"How about Bing shows you some spare quarters where you can make yourself comfortable until we get to Pheste?"

"I don't want to go to Pheste," she told him. "I have business on Imeliv H8."

"You take that up with Aistenz. He told me to bring you to Pheste. What you do after that is up to you."

Bing tapped her elbow. "If you come with me, I'll show you where I keep my private stash of Upsidedowners."

She burst out laughing. "I didn't think you could still get those."

"You can't, so let that be a lesson on how much I like you—but

you can't tell anyone I have them. They're worth their weight in Datrium, you know."

Bing and Akkek left the infirmary laughing together and shooting jokes back and forth. Bing was the perfect person to take her mind off her recent loss.

Rixby did something to the internal scanners and toddled out of the infirmary. Clifton pulled a stool over to DeWalt's bedside and settled down to wait.

Eckhart didn't interfere, but when he got near the exit, he met Dallas there. Dallas prepared to return to his own business without a backward glance.

"Dallas!" Eckhart called. "Wait a minute."

Dallas cocked his head and studied Eckhart through his helmet. "What's on your mind?"

Eckhart nodded toward Ilke. She smiled and listened to the crew's conversation like this was so much entertainment. She never offered a single word in her own defense. "What do you want to do about her?" he asked.

Dallas shrugged. "I have no idea. That's why she's here—because I don't know what to do with her. You're in charge. You decide what to do with her."

"I don't want to do anything to upset you. I don't want to punish her or throw her out if you're going to resent me for it. I know you two—"

"Do what you want with her," Dallas interrupted. "She's nothing to me now."

"Are you sure about that?"

"Absolutely. Throw her out the hatch, for all I care. Do whatever you feel is right. I want you to. I can't trust myself to act impartially where she's concerned. That's why I want you to do it for me."

Eckhart lowered his voice even though no one was listening. Ilke was paying more attention to Clifton and DeWalt than to Eckhart and Dallas, but that might be an act. She might be hanging on every word.

"You know what will happen if we hand her over to Aistenz," Eckhart whispered. "There won't be enough of her left to recognize."

"I know that," Dallas replied. "If anything had happened to you on Laloyama, *I* would have turned her over to Aistenz. What happens to her doesn't concern me anymore. She's a stranger to

me."

"All right, man. I just want you to be okay with it."

"I'm okay with it. I'm glad you're back so I don't have to deal with her anymore."

"All right. I understand." He squeezed Dallas's armored shoulder once. "I'm sorry it had to come to this."

"It doesn't matter," Dallas replied. "She showed who and what she really is…and I guess I did the same thing. It's better this way."

Dallas walked away. His heavy, clomping footsteps receded through the ship. The sound attracted Ilke's attention, or rather, she pretended that it did.

She turned around and smiled her enchanting smile at Eckhart. His heart flipped, remembering the tense, tight grip of her limbs around his body, and he shook himself.

She really knew how to lay on the charm. She'd bewitched Eckhart, and from the sound of it, she'd bewitched Dallas, too.

Then again, maybe she had been different back when Dallas and Ilke were an item. He was different and he'd changed. Why shouldn't she do the same thing?

All her charms and guiles couldn't completely confound anyone. She didn't confound Dallas, and she didn't confound Eckhart. He could see through her, and by the sound of Dallas' statements, he knew exactly who and what Ilke was. She wouldn't fool anybody ever again.

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3

Eckhart scrutinized Rixby. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Will you stop asking me that? I’m fine.”

“Are you sure you’re going to be okay going into town?”

She made a hissing noise under her breath. “If you ask that one more time, I’ll put raks in your bed until you can’t walk.”

“I’m just worried about you going off alone. What if your condition deteriorates while you’re away from the rest of the crew? What if you can’t get back to the ship and we can’t find you?”

This time, she didn’t answer at all. She pushed past him and shuffled off the bridge. Alice straightened up and glared at Eckhart. “If you’re good at one thing, Eckhart, it’s pissing people off. It doesn’t bode well for your long-term survival.”

He passed his hand across his forehead. “I wish I had a chip for every time someone said that to me.”

“You’d be a millionaire, because I’ve told you at least a million times.” She hefted her rocket launcher onto her shoulder. “Let’s get this over with.”

Eckhart headed for the corridor, and Dallas and Bing joined him. “How many chips do you have left?”

Eckhart fished his remaining chips out of his pocket. He held up the three he had left of the eighteen Helvall had paid him for the Oksite crystal.

“Ouch!” Dallas exclaimed. “That won’t go far.”

“I’ll have to spend at least two resupplying our Celdian. We need another job."

“Aistenz will pay you as soon as we get to Pheste,” Bing pointed out. “You’ll be flush then.”

“I don’t want to be flush *then*,” Eckhart countered. “I would much rather be flush now.”

“Maybe you’ll get lucky and you’ll inherit seventy-five chips from your dead old granny,” Bing suggested.

The whole group burst out laughing on their way to the stairs. Eckhart paused at the entrance to the infirmary. Clifton still sat on the same stool at DeWalt’s bedside. “You sure you don’t want to get out of here for a while?”

Clifton looked up and met Eckhart's eyes. Clifton's cheeks sagged, and dark shadows lidded his eyes. He looked like he'd aged ten years in a few hours. "I'm sure. You go on. I'll stay here."

Eckhart shot a sidelong glance at DeWalt and nodded. The banker no longer quaked and sweated. He'd been listless and unresponsive for most of their journey to Banok.

Clifton turned back to watching DeWalt. He erased everything else from his awareness, and Eckhart left him there. No one could help DeWalt now. If he died from this virus, his death would rest on someone else's shoulders. Eckhart had done everything he could for DeWalt, and now DeWalt's fate was out of his hands.

The crew headed downstairs to the hatch, but besides Eckhart's sidearms and Dallas' onboard guns, only Alice took a weapon.

Bing reached the cargo hold first and stood at the open hatch gazing, out. Eckhart paused at his side and the crew watched Rixby waddle across a tree-lined street toward a collection of nicely appointed houses built among shady neighborhoods. She was already at least fifty yards from the ship.

"I don't like her going off alone," Eckhart remarked.

"She'll be all right," Bing replied. "She always is."

"The virus doesn't seem to be affecting her at all," Dallas added, "besides the elevated temperature."

"That's the problem. It didn't affect DeWalt, either," Eckhart replied. "Until now."

Footsteps approached them from behind. Eckhart glanced over his shoulder and checked himself when a strange alien came toward the hatch. It was a male Sovion, much taller than most Sovions.

Its too-short arms stuck out of its long barrel chest, and it swayed on stalk-like legs. Its elongated head undulated on its stretched neck as it walked.

"What the hell is *that*?" Alice hissed.

"Can I assume from your reactions that my disguise is convincing enough?" the Sovion rumbled in a deep, sonorous voice.

Eckhart snorted with laughter. "It's convincing, all right. It took me a second to remember who you were."

"That's good," the Sovion replied. "I don't want anyone here to recognize me."

"Just don't get lost," Bing interjected. "There are plenty of Sovions on Banok. If you got separated from us, we would never find you."

“I would find *you*,” Akkek replied. “I don’t want to stay on this rotten planet. Trust me.”

Eckhart squinted through the hatch. The planet looked as beautiful and serene as any he’d seen, but that placid landscape out there belied the reality hidden beneath the surface. “None of us does. Let’s get our Celdian and make tracks.”

More footsteps drew his attention back to the stairs, and Lashar joined them. She beamed at them all, especially Bing. They hugged each other, and when they broke away, they both had tears in their eyes.

“I wish you weren’t leaving,” Bing choked.

She laughed at him. “You don’t wish I would stay on this ship. I was never much of a mercenary.”

He laughed, too, but it came out more as a sob. “I just hate to lose you.”

She leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek. “You’ll never lose me. Do me a favor and take care of yourself…and *him*.” She jutted her chin at Eckhart.

Bing laughed again, and his tears fell from his eyes. “I don’t think anyone can do that.”

Lashar let him go and came over to Eckhart. “Take care of him for me.”

“I’ll do my best, but I can’t promise anything.” She hugged him, and Eckhart’s throat started to tighten. “Thank you. Thank you for everything.”

“Just don’t make me do it again.”

“Are you going to be okay here?” Eckhart asked. “I wish I could do more for you.”

“You’ve done enough. I’ll be fine as soon as I find the Yakit. Yakit are always in demand here.” She shot one last beaming smile at the whole crew, waved goodbye, and strode through the hatch. She crossed the street much faster than Rixby and disappeared into the buildings beyond.

Bing sniffed watching her go. “She saved my life when I was younger. She left food and money for me, but she always did it in secret. She never wanted me to know who it was who helped me, but I found out anyway. She cared more about me than my own family. She did it for my sister.”

Eckhart put his arm around his friend’s shoulders and squeezed. How fitting that Bing should have known all along who his secret

benefactor was.

Eckhart wished he could keep Lashar around longer, too, but she was right. She didn't belong on the *Marathon*, and everyone knew it.

Now she was gone, hopefully to a better life. Yakit could always make a decent living on Banok. Eckhart and Bing didn't have to worry about her anymore.

Eckhart blew out a shaky breath and started down the ramp. "Let's get this done and get on our way."

He, Bing, Dallas, Akkek, and Alice headed into town. They followed the main streets between the charming houses and manicured gardens, but this place gave Eckhart the creeps. He'd much rather deal with armed crime lords on OSMZ or Drao.

They wound through the residential neighborhood until Eckhart turned into a white-washed building with a large glassed-in winter garden of flowing tropical trees covering its front. Genteel conversation drifted out of the back, and the crew entered a café full of aliens dining at tables. The clink of plates, glasses, and cutlery joined with the gentle bubble of voices.

Eckhart selected one of the few tables available and the crew sat down in the seats—all except Dallas, who would have smashed these thin chairs with his weight.

Dallas stood to one side and scanned the café through his helmet. One or two patrons raised their eyebrows at him, but most were too occupied with their food and their conversations to care about the newcomers.

A Khigi waiter hustled over and started putting cutlery and glasses in front of the *Marathon* crew. "What will it be today, Eckhart? More Celdian?"

"How did you guess, Ocholl?" Bing joked. "We just can't help ourselves. Everyone wants to shoot at us."

The waiter's buggy eyes rotated toward the kitchens. "You'll need to see Vroltox if you want any Celdian."

Eckhart stiffened. "Why do we have to see him?"

"Not the others. Just you, Eckhart."

"Why?" Dallas asked. "What does Vroltox want with Eckhart?"

"I have no idea," Ocholl replied. "He put out a station-wide notice that if you showed up here and wanted Celdian or Datrium, you had to see him first."

"Since when does Vroltox decide who gets what from this

station?" Alice snapped. "He can stuff it. We can get Celdian and Datrium anywhere."

Ocholl glanced toward the kitchens again. "I'm just delivering the message. If you want food or—"

"We don't want food," Eckhart cut in. "Why does Vroltox want to see me? I don't owe him anything. I'm square with him since our last visit."

"I don't think it has anything to do with owing him anything or crossing him. He would have ordered you arrested if it was. He just wants to see you."

"To hell with this." Alice stood up fast enough to knock over her chair. "We don't need this shit. We're leaving."

She crossed the café, but not without bumping into several other patrons on her way there. Dallas and Bing went with her.

Akkek and Eckhart exchanged glances. Eckhart couldn't stay sitting here while his crew walked out, so he and Akkek left, too.

"Why does Vroltox want to see you?" Akkek murmured in his ear.

"How should I know? If Ocholl doesn't know, no one will."

"Screw it," Alice growled. "We can get Celdian from someone else."

"I doubt it," Eckhart replied. "If Vroltox told everyone in town not to serve us until he said so, they won't do it."

Alice stuck out her hand. "Give me your chips. Ocholl said the rest of us can buy. It's just you."

"This won't work." Eckhart handed over his last three chips. Now he was totally penniless.

Alice stalked off to another eatery and came back fuming a few moments later. "Filthy cocksucking weasels! Who the hell do they think they are?"

"Everyone in town knows you work for me," Eckhart told her.

"Give me the chips," Akkek ordered. "I'll get the Celdian."

Alice passed them to her, but Akkek had no better luck than Alice. "What was their excuse this time?" Bing asked. "No one knows *you* work for Eckhart."

"Word must have spread from the café," Eckhart surmised. "Vroltox must have locked down all the Celdian and Datrium on the planet. We'll never get it without meeting with him."

"Then we'll get it somewhere else," Bing suggested.

"We can't," Dallas countered. "We still have DeWalt on board,

which means anyone who wants him might attack us. We don't have the Celdian to defend ourselves. We have no choice but to meet him."

"You'd better be careful," Akkek warned. "Vroltox is a Lion Tribe warlord with a nasty reputation."

"I know all about Vroltox's reputation," Eckhart told her. "No one knows him better than I do."

"But you just said you don't owe him anything. What does he have against you?"

"Nothing, as far as I know."

"He likes Eckhart," Dallas told her.

"He likes hiring Eckhart to do his jobs," Bing added. "He probably wants Eckhart to do a job for him."

"Weren't you just saying you needed another job?" Dallas asked. "Now's your chance."

Eckhart grimaced. "I didn't mean I wanted to do a job for the Lion Tribe. I was thinking more of something simple—"

"Safe," Dallas corrected.

"Easy," Bing added.

"Idiot-proof," Alice finished.

Akkek laughed. That laugh sounded so bizarre coming from a Sovion. "Nothing Vroltox wants you to do will be any of those things."'

"Tell me something I don't know." Eckhart took his chips back from her. "We won't be needing these. He'll give us all the Celdian we need for this job."

"We're gonna need it," Bing murmured behind Eckhart's back as they walked away.

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4

Eckhart strode into a tall office block with all-Ioscesten windows covering every wall. They let the glistening sunshine beam through into the offices.

A bunch of Sovions, not as tall as Akkek's disguise, worked at desks on every level. The place might have looked something like Aistenz's office, except that it was so much bigger, brighter, and more delightful-looking.

Eckhart approached the first Sovion he came to. "Good morning. I'm here to see Vroltox about buying some Celdian."

The Sovion straightened up and then bowed to him. "Of course, Mr. Eckhart. Vroltox is expecting you. Go right on in."

The alien waved to a large double door behind the many desks. "This is not good," Alice growled under her breath. "This is not good at all."

"It's never good when Vroltox expects you," Dallas added.

Eckhart tried not to listen. He rummaged in his memory for anything he might have done to piss off Vroltox, but he couldn't remember anything.

He might have pissed off Vroltox without realizing it. He might be walking into a trap of pain, torture, and a long, agonizing death for himself and his crew, but Dallas was right. They couldn't leave without Celdian. It was just too dangerous.

He pushed open the doors and entered Vroltox's office. An ancient, crooked Elge sat behind a desk that dwarfed the shriveled body. The creature raised its near-blind eyes and blinked at Eckhart. "Ah, Eckhart!" the Elge rasped in a barely audible whisper.

"How ya doin', Kinko?" Eckhart pretended to look around. "Where's Vroltox? I'm told he wants to see me."

Kinko moved his wrinkled paw across his desk, and a holographic projection radiated from the surface. A giant paunchy face with sagging jowls and heavy eyebags glared out of the projection to scrutinize Eckhart. "Ah, Eckhart. I knew it was only a matter of time before you came back here."

"What's up, Vroltox?" Eckhart asked. "We're all square. I just want to buy some Celdian. I don't want any trouble."

“I’ll give you all the Celdian you want,” Vroltox growled. “I have a job for you, Eckhart. I’ve tried all the usual channels. You’re my last option.”

“Unfortunately, I’m already on a job. I have to deliver a payload for Aistenz Trotaer—”

“I’ve already discussed this with Aistenz Trotaer,” Vroltox rumbled. “You can do this job *after* you deliver your payload.”

Eckhart shrugged that away. He’d like to pass on any job Vroltox came up with, but it didn’t sound like Vroltox wanted to give him the option. “What’s the job?”

“I want you to go back to Parilia, Eckhart. I know you grew up there. I want you to find out who killed Zels Ariat.”

Eckhart’s hair stood on end at the name, but he couldn’t show Vroltox any sign of alarm. He played it off instead and kept his tone casual. “I always through the Lion Tribe killed Zels Ariat.”

“The Lion Tribe did *not* kill him,” Vroltox boomed. “I would know if they did. That hit sent shockwaves through the Lion Tribe *and* the Immortals. It led to purges and coups that weakened our clan for decades afterward. The hit brought the Regiment down on our heads and ruined some of our most lucrative sales channels.”

Eckhart frowned and rubbed his chin. He didn’t need Vroltox to tell him any of this. He already knew, but he played stupid anyway. “That’s strange. If the Lion Tribe didn’t hit Zels, I can’t think of who would.”

“Some people say,” Vroltox snarled in his deadliest undertone, “that Aistenz Trotaer ordered the hit.”

Eckhart’s head shot up. He didn’t even try to hide his alarm now. “If finding out who killed Zels leads you back to Aistenz…”

“Are you Aistenz’s man, Eckhart? Word on the wires is that you’re back on his payroll.”

“I’m doing one job for him. I told him explicitly when I took this job that there would only be one. I’m not back on his payroll—not permanently, at least.”

“Then it doesn’t matter if you find out he ordered the hit. We want to know everything—who ordered the hit, who carried it out, and where the assassin is hiding now. We want you to go back to Parilia and start digging up as much of the past as you can. You know almost everyone on the planet, Eckhart. You should be able to get to the bottom of this.”

Eckhart nodded at nothing in particular. “That shouldn’t be too

hard."

"Kinko has already ordered the Celdian for the *Marathon*. You can leave right away."

"Right after I drop off the payload for Aistenz," Eckhart corrected. "I have to finish the job I'm already on."

"Of course," Vroltox rumbled. "Discharge all your obligations to Aistenz. That will leave you free to finger him as the contractor if he is indeed the person who ordered Zels Ariat's assassination."

"Okay," Eckhart breezed. "I can handle that."

"Kinko will also provide you with fifty chips for anything else you need for the job."

Kinko opened a drawer in the massive desk and started stacking chips on the desk. He stacked five piles of ten chips each.

Bing gasped. "Fifty!"

"The Lion Tribe is extremely anxious to locate the responsible party," Vroltox growled even more menacingly. "When you find out who the assassin is and where they are, bring us the information. We'll exact our own form of justice. You don't need to be involved in that."

Kinko pushed the chips across the desk and parked the whole payment in front of Eckhart. He leaned forward and picked them up. They made his pockets bulge.

"Thank you, Vroltox," he told the hologram. "I appreciate your business."

"I look forward to you returning with the information, Eckhart. You can contact Kinko if you need anything else."

Eckhart turned on his heel and left the office. He didn't look right or left on his way straight back to the *Marathon*. He had a bad feeling about landing on Banok and his instincts proved correct.

"You can't take this job," Dallas hissed in his ear. "It's suicide."

"I have to," Eckhart replied. "Anyway, I already did."

"Go back to Kinko's office," Dallas suggested. "Give back the chips. Make some excuse about why you can't do the job."

"Scan the station and find Rixby," Eckhart told him. "We need to get out of here pronto."

"She's already on board. She got back before us." Dallas sped up and cut in front of Eckhart to stop him. "Hold it right there, pal. We aren't leaving Banok—not with Vroltox's money in your pocket. You aren't doing this job. I won't let you."

Bing, Alice, and Akkek gathered around to listen. "What's the

problem with the job?" Bing asked. "Fifty chips! That's the most expensive job we've ever had."

"We don't know that," Alice countered. "We still don't know how much Aistenz is paying us for *her*." She jerked her thumb toward Akkek.

"We aren't taking this job," Dallas insisted. "It's madness."

"Why is it so bad?" Akkek asked. "If you know as much about Parilia as he says, you should be able to find out who killed this Zels character."

"I don't need to go to Parilia to know who killed Zels," Eckhart replied.

"Really?" Bing asked. "How do you know?"

"Because *I* killed Zels Ariat," Eckhart replied.

Akkek gasped, and her Sovion mouth fell open. "You did *not*!"

Eckhart nodded. "It was a long time ago."

"I know when it was. I mean…" She gaped at him, and her disguise started to fade. She got smaller by the second and her Sovion features started to vanish.

She searched Eckhart's face with a very different expression. Then she gulped, and Eckhart cringed. So much for taking this secret to his grave. He watched all his friends' expressions change now that they realized he was responsible for one of the most notorious hits in fringe history.

No one alive today had ever believed the Zels Ariat hit was carried out by a single person. Everyone thought a full team of highly trained operatives had broken into Zels' top-security compound, tracked the bastard down, and dismembered him in one of the most brutal criminal assassinations of all time.

It was no wonder the Lion Tribe had suffered from the hit. Zels Ariat had controlled some of the most lucrative and destructive drug-running empires on the fringes. The Regiment had been trying to capture him for decades at the same time that some of its highest officers were involved in Zels' operation.

When Zels went down, he'd left a power vacuum in the Lion Tribe. His death had sparked numerous internal conflicts between other warlords trying and failing to fill Zels' shoes.

Then the Regiment got involved: not so much to bring the killer to justice as to restore some of their supply lines on the fringes. Other crime syndicates moved in and obliterated sections of Zels' business that couldn't defend themselves once he wasn't around

anymore to protect them.

"Look," Eckhart began. "I have fifty chips here. We'll divide them evenly between us. That's more than enough for each of you to book passage anywhere on the fringes you want to go. I'll go back to Parilia myself and—"

"You said you didn't have to go back to Parilia," Akkek pointed out.

"I have to. I have to make it look like I'm investigating the hit."

"You aren't taking this job," Dallas insisted. "Do you have any idea what the Lion Tribe will do to you if they ever find out the truth—or if both the Lion Tribe and the Immortals find out? The Lion Tribe won't kill you. They'll keep you around for a long, long time, and once they finish with you, they'll hand you over to the Immortals."

Eckhart sighed. "I know that, but I have to take the job. If I didn't take it, Vroltox would start wondering why I didn't take it. He knows I need the money. The only way to throw him off my trail is to make it look like someone else carried out the hit."

"Who?" Bing snorted. "Who could you hate enough to pin *that* hit on?"

"I can think of a few people," Akkek interjected.

"Someone besides the Regiment," Bing countered.

"Forget all that." Eckhart pulled out a handful of chips, but his pockets still bulged. "Here. There are five of us, plus Rixby, Clifton, and DeWalt. That makes eight. That's six chips each plus two left over. We'll use the last two chips to buy weapons and we'll divide those, too. Fair enough?"

His four companions stared back at him, snarling in disgust. Akkek had completely dispensed with her disguise and faced him in her own petite form.

"Put your stinking money away," Bing growled. "Don't insult us."

"I mean it." Eckhart sectioned off six chips and held them out to Dallas. "Take it. I'm serious. None of you should get mixed up in this."

"Are you out of your mind?" Dallas countered. "What the hell are you trying to do—pay us off?"

"Of course not, but if you think it's so dangerous…"

"It isn't *dangerous*, Eckhart," Akkek replied. "It's *unheard of*."

"If you really want to kill yourself, just do it," Alice told him.

“Give us the chips, blow your brains out, and then we’ll return the chips to Kinko and tell him the truth. That would be the honorable thing to do if you really want to spare us the trip to hell and back.”

“I won’t blow my brains out. I’m not finished yet. Here. Just take them.” Eckhart pushed another six chips toward Akkek. “Take them and get out of here before the shit hits the fan.”

She compressed her lips, shot a withering sneer at the chips, and then glared at him. “I don’t want your money, Eckhart.”

“You said you had business on Imeliv H8. This will get you there.”

“You’re letting her go?” Dallas interjected. “What about Aistenz?”

“Look, I don’t know what the hell you want me to do!” Eckhart fired back. “I have to do this job. Do you get that? It’s the only way to stop the Lion Tribe from finding out who really killed Zels Ariat—or anybody else, for that matter. I have to show them I’m investigating the hit.”

“Until what?” Akkek asked. “Are you just gonna keep pulling the wool over their eyes forever? What are you gonna do when the music stops?”

“How the holy hell should I know? Look, if you won’t take the money, then just piss off. Just go. No one is asking you to come along.”

“I’m going with you,” Alice hissed. “You wouldn’t last ten seconds by yourself.”

“Thanks a whole lot, honeybunch,” Eckhart snapped back. “I love you, too.”

“I’m going, too,” Bing replied. “The *Marathon* is the only home I’ve ever had…and it isn’t like we haven’t done dangerous jobs before. This one should be a cakewalk.”

He grinned at Eckhart, and even smirked at Dallas and Akkek, until he spotted Alice skewering him with her sightless eyes.

“I’m in, too,” Dallas told him. “You’re the only captain who ever gave me a job after I got my prosthetics.”

“Look,” Eckhart began again. “This is stupid. You should—”

“Is there any way I can convince you to take me to Imeliv H8 instead of Pheste?” Akkek cut in. “What if I give up my six chips? Will that convince you?”

“You mean cross Aistenz?” Eckhart made a face. “You’d need a lot more than six chips to convince me of that.”

“Why can’t you go to Pheste, check in with Aistenz, and then go to Imeliv H8?” Bing asked.

Akkek rubbed her chin. “I guess I could.”

“What do you have to do on Imeliv H8 that’s so important?” Dallas asked.

“She’s probably got a boyfriend there,” Bing teased.

“Or several,” Dallas went on.

“Can we get back to the part where we come up with a way to trick some of the most dangerous criminals in the galaxy that Eckhart isn’t a cold-blooded killer?” Alice barked.

“I’m not a cold-blooded killer,” Eckhart replied. “I killed a man who was responsible for millions of drug deaths every year. He sold to children, got them hooked, and used them to get their friends hooked. Zels Ariat was the scum of the universe. The galaxy is better off without him, and if hitting Zels weakened both the Lion Tribe and the Immortals, then killing him made the world a better place. I don’t regret it for a second, and I’d do it all again.”

The other four fell silent for a moment. They searched his face even more intently. He felt himself under a microscope, and he didn’t like it at all. His crew had never questioned his character like this—not ever—but there was always a first time for everything.

He stood up under their inspection. If they turned on him for hitting Zels, then he was better off without them, too. If these people, his closest friends, didn’t understand why he’d accepted the job from Aistenz, then they would never understand him.

They all knew about Zels. Everyone knew about Zels. Everyone knew how bad he had been. Everyone knew he would stop at nothing to make a fortune. Zels didn’t give a rat’s ass who he hurt or who he killed as long as the profits kept rolling in.

Eckhart carried that hit as a badge of honor. He was proud of himself for getting rid of that piece of shit. He’d just never told anyone because he knew the consequences would be dire—not to say cataclysmic.

He’d kept the secret as much to protect his crew as himself. If he regretted anything in this catastrophic job, it was that they all insisted on coming with him.

“Welp,” Akkek finally exclaimed, “what are we waiting for?”

“You aren’t going anywhere,” Eckhart told her. “You’re going straight to Pheste.”

She smiled up at him, all her reserve from a moment before

gone in a second. “I’ll go to Pheste. I’ll check in with Aistenz. You’ll get paid, and then I’m coming with you to Parilia.”

“What about your boyfriend on Imeliv H8?” Bing asked. “He’ll get his feelings hurt if you stand him up.”

She cracked a brilliant grin, not just at Eckhart and Bing, but at all of them. “I’ve been in the Silvercloud Vault for five years. I think he can manage without me for a few more.”

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5

Eckhart climbed the stairs heading for the bridge, but he halted in his tracks when he came to the infirmary door. His jaw hit the floor when he looked inside.

DeWalt sat on the edge of the exam table, talking to Clifton. DeWalt's bright, clear eyes snapped over to Eckhart, and the banker's cheeks flushed when he smiled. "Howdy."

"Howdy. How do you feel?"

"Great." DeWalt blinked, thinking about it. "I feel great."

Rixby worked on the internal scanners across the room. "His temperature is back down to the Earthling normal range. He's in perfect health."

Eckhart crossed to the side, and his chest tightened when he checked the readings. "Yours is still elevated even more. It's doubled since we first checked it."

"I still feel fine." She turned her antennae up to him. "Don't even think about taking me off duty, Eckhart. I won't stand for it."

"You might want to rethink that. Vroltox gave us a new job—"

"I know all about it. He sent through a bunch of files along with the Celdian. We're going to find out who hit Zels Ariat."

Eckhart turned away, feeling sick to his stomach. He couldn't tell her the truth about himself being the unknown assassin. She'd find out from one of the others soon enough.

"What's this about a new job?" DeWalt hopped off the table and started putting on a fresh shirt.

Eckhart watched DeWalt button the shirt over his perfect, unblemished chest. The banker showed not a single sign of any bullet wound. For a split second, Eckhart considered getting Rixby to infect *him* with DeWalt's virus. Eckhart would need to be bulletproof and knife-proof and red-hot iron-proof when the Lion Tribe eventually got hold of him.

He shook those thoughts out of his head. He couldn't start thinking that way. He might drag out this pretend investigation for years.

He went to the bridge and slumped in his seat. He ran through the documents Vroltox had sent him. They didn't tell him anything

he didn't already know. The Lion Tribe had sent through a bunch of personal information about their enemies and potential enemies—people they thought might want to hit Zels or put out a hit on him.

Of course Aistenz Trotaer was on the list. As a matter of fact, he was at the top of the list, so the Lion Tribe got that part right, at least. Eckhart would have to tell Aistenz what was going on once Eckhart brought Akkek to Pheste.

Even that gave Eckhart a bad taste in his mouth. He already knew what Aistenz's proposed solution would be.

Aistenz would suggest bringing Eckhart even deeper under his protection. That would tip off the Lion Tribe more than anything else. Eckhart might as well run up a flag labeled, *Zels Ariat's Killer Here for the Taking*. Maybe he wouldn't tell Aistenz after all.

Alice showed up and went to her station. She worked on adjusting the engines for a while. "Do you want me to lay in a course for Pheste?" she finally asked over her shoulder.

Eckhart saw on the regulators that she'd already pre-programmed the navigation system with the course. She didn't even wait for him to answer.

Eckhart sighed. "What the hell else do I have to do with my time? We have to drop off Akkek. What we do then can wait until afterward."

"Don't forget your payment," she reminded him. "Aistenz promised he'd destroy the crystal."

"He promised he'd put it somewhere no one else could get it. There's a difference."

She turned her hollow eye sockets to face him. "What place could be more unreachable than destroying it? If you really want to stop anyone from using it, you'd better get him to destroy it."

Rixby tottered in and interrupted their conversation, which was a relief, because Eckhart didn't want to talk about the crystal. He didn't want to talk about Aistenz, Akkek, Vroltox, Parilia, Zels, or anything else, really.

He checked the internal scanners to make sure all the rest of the crew was on board. He fired up the engines and lifted off the surface, following Alice's course in an automatic stupor.

Much as he tried to stop thinking, his brain had other ideas. The same thought kept coming back to him no matter how many times he pushed it away.

He'd killed Zels Ariat, but he couldn't let the Lion Tribe find out

about that. Ergo, he had to make them believe someone else did it.

But who? Who did he hate enough to make them exact their revenge on an innocent target? Who was as bad as that? Who deserved to die that much?

He could think of a lot of people as bad as that whose death would do the fringes a giant favor. The fringes were crawling with people like that.

It was the subterfuge that rankled Eckhart. He would almost rather face the Lion Tribe's retribution than finger someone who didn't do it. No one was bad enough to take his punishment for him.

The regulators sounded an alarm and snapped him out of his trance. He shook himself alert to find that he'd gone off course. He hadn't even been paying attention to where he was flying.

He shot out of his chair. "Take over for me, will you, Alice?"

He left the bridge without waiting for her answer. Anyone could fly to Pheste. He went back to the infirmary, but he turned on his heel when Ilke smiled at him like that. She revolted him, but he still had to figure out what to do about her, too. His life got more and more complicated, with no solutions in sight.

He headed for the galley, even though he didn't want to see anybody. In the end, he went back to his own quarters, but when he got near them, he met Akkek coming the other way to meet him.

Her soft eyes made him feel better. "Do you have a minute?" she asked.

"I have quite a few. What can I do for you?"

"I want to talk to you."

Eckhart groaned inwardly. Talking was the last thing he wanted to do. Still, he went into his quarters and waved toward the bunk. "It isn't much, but it's the most private place on the ship. What's on your mind?"

She sat down. "I don't want to go to Pheste."

"You said that already, but as you can probably understand, I don't have much of a choice. Aistenz hired me to take you to Pheste, so that's what I plan to do."

"Do you always do what Aistenz tells you to?"

"When he's paying me to do a job, yeah. What's so bad about Pheste? Why are you so set on not going there? He calls it his safe house. He made it sound like you'd be safer there than anywhere else."

“That’s the problem.”

He raised his eyebrows. “What do you mean?”

“I have these abilities now. I can become invisible…among other things. I don’t want to be safe. I want to use these abilities to make the fringes a better place. I want to use my abilities against anyone who would make them a worse place.”

Eckhart laughed. “Who are you talking about? The fringes are full of people who make them a worse place. Hell, why don’t you go the whole hog and go after the damn Regiment?”

She blinked up at him with her gentle, open countenance, and Eckhart’s heart plummeted into his stomach. He choked on his own breath and almost collapsed against the table. “No!” he rasped. “No! You can’t!”

“Who makes the fringes as bad as the Regiment?” she murmured. “They want to annihilate the whole alien population on the fringes. That’s trillions of people, most of them innocent civilians. I lost three of my best friends trying to stop them. I don’t want their deaths to count for nothing.”

Eckhart threw up his hands and spun away, but since he was in his own cramped, tight quarters, there was nowhere else to go.

He paced to the opposite wall and came back. “You can’t go after the Regiment. It’s impossible. It’s ridiculous. It’s suicide.”

“Not for me.”

“Forget it. You’re going to Pheste. If you want to throw your life away fighting the Regiment, that’s between you and Aistenz. Leave me out of it.”

She inclined her head the other way and examined him with drilling intensity. “Why did you steal Clifton and DeWalt from the Regiment? Why did you keep the crystal with you for so long? You’re just as committed to stopping the Regiment as I am, Eckhart. Don’t lie.”

“Committed!” He burst into hysterical laughter. This was the ultimate capper. “I’m not committed to anything, honey, except saving my own worthless hide. Don’t you realize that? I’m a mercenary. I’m a hired gun. I’m as bad as any of the crime syndicates.” He leaned his face close to hers and practically bellowed in a desperate hope of driving the news into her brain. “*I* killed Zels Ariat!”

“I know. You told me.”

He yanked the door open. “We’ll be on Pheste in a few hours.

You can go after the Regiment after that."

He stormed out of his quarters, but he was only running away from his problems. He was running away from Akkek. He was running away from the Lion Tribe. He was running away from his whole life.

He had nowhere left to run. That was the worst part. There was nowhere on this ship where he could get away from it all.

He headed downstairs, planning to find something on the ship that needed adjusting or fixing. He could always find something like that, but when he got near the stairs, Dallas came toward him from the cargo hold.

Eckhart seriously considered walking back the other way, but something in the determined way Dallas planted himself in front of Eckhart made him halt. "We got a problem."

"Another one?" Eckhart covered his eyes. "Now what?"

"Come with me."

Eckhart cringed when he realized Dallas was leading him back to the infirmary. Would he find DeWalt's dead body there?

He walked in, and didn't initially realize what the problem was. The infirmary was deserted and empty.

Then he saw it. The infectious containment field was gone…and so was Ilke. Eckhart's hand instinctively flew to his sidearm. "Where is she?"

"That's what I'm telling you. She escaped."

"When?" Eckhart rounded on Dallas. "How?"

"I have no idea. As soon as we came back from Banok, we launched and I came in here to check on her. She was inside the field and she said…" Dallas trailed off and then straightened up.

"Don't leave me in suspense," Eckhart snapped. "When did you notice her gone?"

"After I checked on her, I went downstairs and filled up on nutrient. While I was there, Alice sent me a message through my helmet and said she wasn't sure about the purity of the Celdian that Vroltox gave us. She asked me to check on it, and I came back upstairs. I passed the door and noticed Ilke gone. I just finished searching the hold. I can't find her anywhere."

Eckhart whirled away. "Find Akkek. Bring her back up here and __"

He sprang for the weapons locker outside the bridge door. He tore two rifles off the rack and started arming them when a

deafening clang echoed through the ship.

The floor tipped up violently and sent Eckhart wheeling into the bulkhead. Another blow pummeled the ship back the other way, and both Eckhart and Dallas toppled into the railing next to the stairs.

"What the hell!" Eckhart yelled.

"We're under attack!" Dallas rushed him and snatched both rifles out of Eckhart's hands. "Get to the bridge! I'll deal with Ilke."

Eckhart didn't argue. He spun around and dashed onto the bridge. "What the hell is going on?"

"Ten enemy ships coming straight out of Pheste!" Alice called from the command chair. Another barrage of plasma scorched the *Marathon*'s sides. "They're attacking us.'

"I get that! Who the hell are they?"

Alice didn't turn away from the tactical web. She jerked back and forth, ripping the ship from side to side between the attacking enemy fighter craft. "We didn't stop for introductions."

Another blast knocked the ship backward, and Eckhart had to hold onto the railing to steady himself. Alice fired jets of Datrium at the enemy, but the fighter craft moved so fast Eckhart couldn't identify them, either.

Four fighter craft wheeled behind the *Marathon* and bombarded the Celdian shielding while four more cut in front of the ship. They surrounded the *Marathon*, but Alice dodged between them and sprinted out the other side.

Eckhart didn't see how he could help her. He backed toward the door and stuck his head through. "Akkek! Get up here! Akkek!"

No one answered him. Where was she when he needed her? She'd better not be out there trying to fight the Regiment right now.

He returned to the bridge to find another twenty enemy craft launching from a city-sized base near the southern continent's western coast.

Eckhart sprang for Alice's usual chair and attacked the controls. "Aistenz's safe house is on the other side of the planet.'

"Did you think he sent these assholes out to destroy us? Aargh!" Alice snarled through her gas mask, yanking the regulators hard to starboard, but too many enemies surrounded the ship.

Eckhart did his best to block the battle out of his mind. "Alter course! Turn back toward Banok!"

"You can take Banok straight to hell!" Alice roared.

“Do it!” Eckhart erased the course she’d laid in for Pheste. “We can’t get near the planet.”

She started to argue when the enemy attacked even more ferociously.

“Who the hell *are* these people?” Rixby screeched.

“They’re Silent Death!” Eckhart replied. “They’re using Nathlatine drive. Get away from the planet now!”

“You’re cracked!” Alice countered. “I don’t see any trace of…”

The enemy craft spiraled around the *Marathon*, and a brilliant yellow light pulsed out of ten ships at once. The light surrounded the *Marathon* in a glowing halo for a split second. All ten enemy craft projected it at once—and the tactical web blinked out.

Alice sat rooted to her chair, and Eckhart stared at the shadowy bridge where the web should have been.

The enemy charged the *Marathon* from all sides, and this time, their plasma pounded the hull with deep, booming thumps.

Rixby recovered first and whirled around on her workstation, stepping on her controls. “The shields are down! We’re sitting ducks! You have to withdraw, Alice!”

“That’s bullshit!” Alice roared. “Celdian supply is still at 87%.”

“The Celdian supply is fine but the shield is out! Pull back!” Rixby screeched. “We can’t fight them.”

Alice jerked upright and slammed the regulators hard to port, but enemy craft faced her from every direction. She fired back at them, but too many others followed up with their attack.

Their shots rang through the hull and the vibration shook Eckhart’s seat. Every blow smacked the ship from one side to the other.

The enemy pounded the *Marathon* backward and, one blast at a time, started driving it closer to Pheste.

“Scan the surface!” Rixby squealed. “See if you can contact anyone attached to Aistenz.”

“I’m trying!” Eckhart called back. “The bombardment is blocking all communications with the surface.”

She screamed something else, but Eckhart couldn’t hear her over the noise. The ship dipped into the atmosphere and shuddered. Alice fought the regulators to tear the ship back into space, but the planet’s gravity caught it and towed it down toward the surface.

“They’re driving us to the southern continent!” Rixby reported.

“We won’t ever get to the southern continent. They’ll destroy us

long before we get there." Eckhart stood up, grabbed the railing, and started pulling himself hand over hand toward the bridge door.

"Why do they want to destroy us?" Rixby asked. "What did we do to them?"

Eckhart didn't answer. There was only one way out of this. Another bombardment toppled him off his feet. He crashed into the door, and it burst open under his weight. He staggered out into the corridor and staggered for the stairs.

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6

Dallas activated the magnetic seals on his leg prosthetics. They glued his feet to the floor so he didn't tip over when the ship rocked.

He scanned every inch of the *Marathon* through his helmet, but he didn't pick up any sign of Ilke. Where the hell was she? She couldn't just disappear like that. She had to be on the ship somewhere, but where?

He clomped down the stairs and returned to the cargo hold. He'd already searched the whole thing before he alerted Eckhart to Ilke's escape, but if Dallas knew anything about her, Ilke would move around. She wouldn't stay in one place.

He read every life sign on board. Eckhart, Alice, and Rixby were on the bridge fighting whoever was attacking the *Marathon* from Pheste. Bing, Clifton, and DeWalt were all buckled into their safety harnesses in the forward crew lounge behind the bridge.

That left not just Ilke but Akkek unaccounted for. What could Ilke want with Akkek—or vice versa? Did Ilke do something to Akkek…or did Akkek do something to Ilke?

No, that couldn't be right. Dallas had seen Akkek talking to Eckhart just a few minutes before Dallas told Eckhart about Ilke escaping. Ilke didn't do anything to her.

He headed for the cargo hold one more time when Eckhart called his name. "Dallas!"

Dallas looked up to see Eckhart hanging over the railing from the upper deck. "What's up—besides the obvious?"

"Where's Akkek?" Eckhart asked. "We need her on the bridge."

"I was just looking for her. She isn't showing up on my scanners. As far as I can tell, she isn't on the ship anymore.'

Eckhart stared at him. "That's impossible."

"That's what I thought, but both she and Ilke have vanished."

Eckhart gulped. "Shit."

"I was just going to look for them, but my sensors aren't picking up either of them at all. I have to go through the ship with a fine-toothed comb."

Eckhart stood still and horrified, staring down at Dallas. Eckhart

didn't answer for so long that Dallas wondered if he had finally blown a circuit. After a pause that lasted way too long, Eckhart stumbled back to the bridge, and Dallas went on.

He entered the cargo hold and scanned it, but the two women didn't turn up. He stomped through the hold, but there were only so many places Ilke could hide in here.

He checked behind the plasma aligner and under the volatility bolt aligner, but he no longer expected to find either of them—in here or anywhere else.

He turned back toward the stairs and scanned the ship again, for lack of anything better to do. The crew quarters, the crew lounge, the galley, the infirmary—how many places could someone hide on a spaceship?

He went through the cupboards in the galley and finally went back upstairs to the crew quarters. He halted at the end of the corridor and listened, but the incessant pounding of gunfire against the hull made it impossible to hear anything—unusual or otherwise.

He clenched his fists, and his assault guns slotted out of his wrists. He loaded Datrium into them, ready to shoot the instant Ilke showed herself.

She would try to sweet-talk her way back into Dallas' heart. She would try to play on his emotions to get him to spare her. He couldn't let that happen. He *wouldn't* let it happen.

He wished Eckhart was here, or Clifton, or Bing—anyone who didn't feel the way he did about Ilke. He needed someone who would just blow her away without thinking twice.

He flung open the door to DeWalt's quarters. Dallas pivoted across the threshold and passed his guns into the narrow compartment. Nothing.

He went to Clifton's quarters next, and Bing's. He searched the quarters Eckhart had assigned to Akkek, and then he checked Alice's. Ilke and Akkek weren't in any of them. Of course they weren't. He didn't expect them to be.

He paused outside Rixby's quarters. Ilke wouldn't hide in Rixby's quarters. She would pick a hiding place she thought no one would check. She would hide somewhere she thought the rest of the crew wouldn't mess with. Where would that be?

Dallas didn't want to think about Ilke hiding in *his* own quarters. Then he remembered his conversation with Eckhart in the infirmary.

Dallas had told Eckhart that he no longer cared what Eckhart did with Ilke. He'd told Eckhart to do whatever he wanted with her, and he'd said it in front of Ilke. She pretended not to listen, but she must have heard.

She knew Dallas no longer cared about her—not like that. She wouldn't pull a sentimental move like hiding in his quarters. She was too smart to think he might protect her.

That left one possible hiding place. He continued down the corridor, passed his own quarters without checking, and halted outside Eckhart's door.

Dallas hesitated. He'd never set foot in Eckhart's quarters in all the years he'd been working on the *Marathon*. He couldn't remember a time when Bing, Alice, or Rixby had set foot in this compartment. Ilke must be counting on that.

Dallas raised his assault guns. He aimed at the door and then pushed it open.

It swung inward and he stared inside at a scene out of his worst nightmares.

Ilke's magical face bobbed five feet off the floor. A whirling galaxy of slithering serpentine limbs tumbled and twisted and seethed and writhed in the air in front of her. Almost nothing remained of her body, besides her head smiling up at him.

"Dallas!" she lilted. "I thought you would never come."

He stepped across the threshold and aimed both assault guns at her. "Give yourself up, Ilke. You can't get away."

Her smile broadened in triumph. "I don't want to get away, Dallas. Don't you understand that by now? I'm right where I want to be."

He aimed his guns at her head. "I won't hesitate to kill you. Come out and go back to the containment field in the infirmary. We'll land on Pheste soon and you can plead your case to Aistenz."

"You won't kill me, Dallas," she purred. "You won't even shoot at me, or you might hit the one person who can make sure you make it to Pheste alive."

She glided the tangled mass of arms through the air. The twisting mass of limbs moved in front of Dallas to block his aim at her.

He didn't understand what she meant. Her arms wouldn't stop the Datrium from scorching her to death, but when the knot of tentacles hovered before his eyes, his blood went cold.

The dozens of limbs surrounded an empty space in the center. They slithered all over it and surrounded it…and he recognized a small body shape in the center.

"She's very useful, isn't she?" Ilke mused. "She thought she could hide from me, but making herself invisible doesn't make her invincible. Actually, it does. She almost got away from me, but Mozari touch does something to her. She can't get away from me no matter what she does."

Dallas's pulse quickened when he recognized Akkek in that tangled web of twisting arms. She struggled and wrenched against Ilke's grip, but the Mozari's unbreakable hold refused to release her.

Ilke cocked her head to one side and smiled up at the invisible shape in infuriating fascination. "You won't kill *her*, Dallas. If you shoot me, I'll use her as a shield."

Ilke's face floated over to the wall. She suspended Akkek in front of her to protect herself from Dallas.

Ilke paused in front of a wall panel by the door, and one of her many arms detached from the knot. She tapped at the controls. "Silent Death can't wait to get their secret ingredient back. They won't destroy the *Marathon* until they get it."

"*You* did this?" Dallas growled. "You disabled the ship."

"I didn't have to disable the ship. The Silent Death has weapons we don't even know about."

"Let Akkek go!" Dallas ordered. "If the Silent Death destroys the *Marathon*, you'll go down with it."

"I told you, Dallas. They won't destroy the ship. They only want to disable it and get Akkek back. She's worth a lot of money, you know, to them and to me."

"Are they paying you for her?" Dallas cursed under his breath. "You traitor! I should have killed you when I had the chance."

"You always were too soft, Dallas. My sisters warned me about you, but you had to run off and rejoin the Regiment. You should have quit the Regiment when you still had a man's body left. Maybe then we could have had something."

Her words stung, but he still didn't lose control. She turned her head and did something else to the panel. "I'll just deactivate your engines—"

Dallas reacted instinctively. He jerked up his guns and fired, aiming directly for her head.

She swung Akkek into the path of his shots, but the plasma jets

sizzled straight through her. They didn't hit Ilke's arms or Akkek or any other part of Ilke. The whole jumbled mass of flesh shimmered before Dallas's eyes. Then it all went slightly transparent.

Dallas stared in stark horror as Ilke screamed. Her limbs tightened around Akkek and the snarled mess dropped through the floor. Nothing remained but Eckhart's empty quarters.

Dallas swung his guns from right to left, but neither Ilke nor Akkek was here anymore. They'd gone through the floor. That meant they were back downstairs.

Dallas aimed his sensors downward and detected something in the Crick centrifuge. It didn't register as Mozari. It didn't register as any lifeform he could identify. There was nothing like this anywhere on the fringes…or anywhere in existence.

He started to turn away when someone crashed into the wall behind him. Eckhart stumbled against the threshold and his wild eyes skipped around the compartment. "Where… are they?" he panted. "I…heard gunfire."

"They were here, but they aren't now. They're downstairs in the Crick centrifuge."

"Huh? How did they get down there?"

"I have no clue. I'm going down there. Ilke captured Akkek. She's holding her captive. Ilke's communicating with Silent Death. She wants to sell Akkek for a reward."

"I'm coming with you."

Dallas shot out a hand and stopped Eckhart. "Go back to the bridge. This is between me and Ilke."

"But we need Akkek. She's the only one who can get us out of this battle."

Dallas shook his head. "Akkek won't be able to help you anytime soon. You'll have to get out of it on your own. You're good at that."

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7

Eckhart lurched back to the bridge to find the *Marathon* close to freefall. Alice bellowed through her mask and drove the engines to the breaking point.

Silent Death ships kept swatting the *Marathon* farther down into the atmosphere. They fired on the ship just enough to stop it from escaping, but not hard enough to completely implode the hull.

Alice gunned the engines, struggling to break free. Every time the enemy let up even slightly, she soared higher, only to take another brutal smack deeper into the atmosphere.

"Where are they taking us?" Eckhart asked.

"They're steering us to a desert fifty miles from their base," Rixby replied.

Eckhart sat down at Alice's usual place and started on the controls. "We're low enough in the atmosphere. Maybe we can get a message to Aistenz."

"There are no life signs at the place where he told us to drop off Akkek," Rixby replied. "It's deserted."

Eckhart stiffened, but he could see on his controls that she was right. The Silent Death base was the only inhabited settlement on the planet, except for a few native encampments on the northern continent.

In desperation, he turned back to the internal scanners. He picked up Dallas heading downstairs to the Crick centrifuge, but he couldn't detect Akkek or Ilke. So much for that. Wherever Akkek was, she couldn't help him now.

Rixby screamed again and snapped him out of his thoughts. "Ten Colossuses coming in fast and furious! They're heading this way."

"Colossuses!" Eckhart attacked his instruments in a frenzy. "Is the Regiment helping Silent Death?"

"They're attacking—they're attacking Silent Death! They're driving Silent Death off!"

"Gun it, Alice!" Eckhart roared. "Get out of here now!"

She roared something inarticulate through her mask and nearly tore the regulators out of the floor, driving the ship straight up

through the atmosphere.

The *Marathon* tipped at a dangerous angle and the engines exploded. The ship fired up through the Silent Death attack force, but the enemy didn't try to stop it.

The incoming battle craft fired incinerating Datrium blasts past the wings and pounded the enemy. Alice rotated the *Marathon* on its side and squeaked between the shots, burning up the light years on a dead course for the Colossuses.

"We're clearing the atmosphere!" Rixby cried. "We're free!"

"We are *not* going back to Pheste," Alice snarled. "I don't give a shit what Aistenz says."

Eckhart was too busy scanning the battle. The Colossuses plummeted into the atmosphere and trapped the Silent Death attack force beneath the ionosphere, where Nathlatine drive wouldn't help them.

Celdian shields glimmered around every Colossus. The Silent Death tried to pull the same trick and deployed their pulse weapon, but it didn't touch the Colossuses.

The giant battleships hovered miles above the surface, and jets of plasma spouted from their gun ports. They fired in all directions at once, and sent the Silent Death attack vessels spinning out of control.

The Silent Death tried to rally, and more ships launched from their base. They hurtled for the Colossuses and tried to shoot their way through, only to fall before their overwhelming firepower.

"Why did the Regiment help us?" Rixby asked.

"Those ships aren't from the Regiment," Eckhart replied. "Turn back, Alice! We have to go back."

"The hell you say!"

He whirled around and was on his feet in a second. "Go back. It's all right. No one will shoot at us again."

Just then, the communications channel blinged and Aistenz Trotaer appeared on Alice's display. "Did you bring my payload like I asked?"

Eckhart leaned over Alice and laughed at his friend. "We got it. We thought you weren't here."

"I wasn't. Someone followed you from the Silvercloud Vault, so I pulled out and set up on the fourteenth moon. You're all clear to land at my safe zone. You have the coordinates."

"Yeah. I do." Eckhart swallowed down a lump of relief in his

throat. “Thank you.”

“I protect what’s mine. I’ll see you in a few minutes.”

Aistenz’s Colossus cut the channel and started to descend. The Silent Death ships whizzed around them a few more times, but when another ten detonated in clouds of plasma, Silent Death pulled back and returned to their base.

Eckhart straightened up and watched the last of the battle on the front screen. The Colossuses landed at the coordinates Aistenz had given Eckhart.

Alice looked up at him and her voice came out softer and more sympathetic than he ever remembered. “Are you really going to hand Akkek over to him?”

“I have to find her first.”

Alice guided the ship back down into the atmosphere, and Eckhart left the bridge. He had to find Akkek before the ship landed.

He went down to the cargo hold and spotted Dallas standing in front of the Crick centrifuge. Dallas stood unnaturally still, and he didn’t have his assault guns out. That wasn’t like him.

Eckhart inched nearer. Dallas didn’t look at him when Eckhart arrived at his side. Dallas stared into the Crick centrifuge, and Eckhart followed his gaze.

The cavity that formed a narrow crawl space should have ended at the centrifuge, but Eckhart couldn’t see it. A blurry smudge of non-space came in and out of focus where the centrifuge should be. Or, to put it more accurately, it occupied the same space as the centrifuge…when it occupied any space at all.

Every now and then, the smudge became more transparent and he could see the centrifuge beyond it. Then it solidified again or became completely invisible, so he couldn’t see anything at all.

In front of his eyes, a face emerged from the hazy smear in reality. It congealed into Ilke’s beautiful countenance, but she didn’t smile in condescending triumph anymore.

Her mouth twisted sideways, and all her features contorted in a mask of agony. Her eyes, cheeks, mouth, and jawline distorted into a surreal caricature of her before they liquefied and became nothing but a molten, unrecognizable smear.

The mass rotated in front of Eckhart, and a bunch of sinuous limbs appeared before they, too, disappeared. The smudge swirled and reformed as another face lifted out of the confused soup of

images.

Akkek's small, delicate features passed before his view. She had her eyes shut, and she didn't grimace or contort the way Ilke did. She looked like she was asleep, and then she submerged and became nothing again.

Eckhart glanced over at Dallas, but his friend didn't say anything. There was nothing to say.

Eckhart watched them for a moment until Rixby and Alice came downstairs. Alice took one look into the centrifuge and left. Rixby waved her antennae at the mass, but didn't say anything, either.

Eckhart finally turned away, but he didn't leave the centrifuge. What exactly was he supposed to tell Aistenz? He couldn't think of any possible explanation for what had happened. Eckhart didn't even *know* what had happened.

Aistenz was waiting for him out there. Aistenz was waiting for Akkek. How exactly was Eckhart supposed to handle this? Would Aistenz be furious? Eckhart *did* finish the job by delivering Akkek to Pheste. Did that earn him his payment?

Eckhart stood in the center of the cargo hold, trying to wrestle his brain into some semblance of order. Nothing made sense. None of what happened fit into any coherent sequence of actions he could follow to bring this to any acceptable conclusion—or any other kind of conclusion, for that matter.

Something cheeped on Rixby's remote workstation. Alice was already standing next to it, doing something on Rixby's controls. "Aistenz is coming out to meet you. He's approaching the hatch from outside."

"Hooray," Eckhart grumbled. "Good times a-comin'."

"What do you want to do?" Alice asked.

"What—like shoot at him until he goes away? Open the hatch. I have to talk to him."

"What are you going to tell him?"

"I have no idea."

The hatch popped, and Eckhart stepped outside. A strong wind swept a wide landing area surrounding a bunch of tall buildings. The Colossuses that Aistenz had used to drive off the Silent Death sat on their landing gear not far away.

Aistenz's major domo Squids sloped across the landing area, leading Aistenz on his gold chain. Aistenz floated above the ground and his wings buzzed in the wind.

“Well done, Eckhart!” he rasped. “You’ll receive a handsome payment for bringing Akkek back to me.”

“Don’t promise me anything until you see exactly what I brought back to you.”

“Is Akkek dead?” Aistenz asked. “Did you fail me, Eckhart? I’m surprised.”

“She isn’t dead. She’s…” Eckhart waved toward the *Marathon*, but he didn’t finish the sentence. He didn’t know what Akkek was.

“Where is she?” Aistenz demanded. “Why don’t you send her out here to meet me? I paid a lot of money for you to bring her here, Eckhart.”

“Oh, I brought her here. She’s here. Come inside and you can see her.”

Squids followed him up the ramp and into the cargo hold. Alice and Dallas stood back and watched Eckhart approach the Crick centrifuge. Squids halted at Eckhart’s side and Aistenz floated where he couldn’t fail to see…whatever it was.

“What the devil is this?” Aistenz hissed. “What have you done with her?”

“I didn’t do anything to her. She’s right here. I brought her back like you said.”

“Where is she?” Aistenz fell silent while Akkek’s face appeared from the blurry mass followed by Ilke’s. “What in the name of Heaven is this?”

Dallas stepped forward. “Excuse me, sir, but Eckhart didn’t do this. Akkek did it to herself.”

Aistenz spun around with a vicious hiss. “How could she do this to herself?”

“Have you ever heard of the Luminous Breath?” Eckhart asked.

“The what?”

“Ilke attacked Akkek,” Dallas went on. “As a matter of fact, Ilke attacked us, too. We went to Taio to purchase the heat shielding to get into the Silvercloud Vault. Ilke alerted the Regiment that we had Coleman DeWalt on board. She tried to sell us to the Regiment in exchange for a reward for DeWalt’s capture.”

“Then you should have killed her for it,” Aistenz snarled. “You should have cleaved her limb from limb as a traitor deserves.”

“There wasn’t time before we had to rendezvous with Eckhart and Akkek. Eckhart got Akkek out of the Silvercloud Vault whole and intact, just like you ordered. She was fine when we left the

prison."

"She isn't fine now," Aistenz spat. "She's useless to me like this."

"I can assure you, sir," Dallas told him. "Whatever her condition, she did this to neutralize Ilke. Ilke was the one who called the Silent Death to attack us. She was going to sell Akkek to the Silent Death. Ilke captured Akkek, and when I tried to stop her, Akkek…"

Aistenz waited for Dallas to say something else. "Well? What did Akkek do?"

Dallas waved toward the centrifuge. "She did *this*. She made Ilke transparent and transported them both here."

Aistenz stared at Dallas with his huge, glassy eyes. "I have no idea what the hell you just said."

"Ilke said Mozari were immune to…whatever Akkek did, but that was obviously a mistake."

Aistenz rounded on Eckhart. "What the hell is he talking about?"

"I'm not really sure," Eckhart admitted. "I don't really understand what Akkek does."

Aistenz turned back around and stared at the apparition in the centrifuge. In the end, it was Squids who broke the tense silence. "What is this Luminous Breath you mentioned?"

"Akkek didn't want me to tell you," Eckhart replied.

"I'll tell you."

Everyone spun around as Rixby waddled over.

"Rixby!" Eckhart exclaimed. "What are you doing?"

"I didn't promise not to tell. I'll tell you what the Luminous Breath is, Mr. Trotaer."

"Then tell me. I've had enough of riddles for one day."

"Rixby…" Eckhart began.

"It's a substance the Regiment developed. They stole the base formula from the Kruvin and used the Silent Death and the Immortals to brew a substance that would make a soldier invisible and invincible to gunfire. They planned to breed a new army of super soldiers to use against the fringe aliens."

"How do you know all that?" Eckhart blurted out.

"I looked it up. When you mentioned it just now, I searched the records. It isn't as secret as the Regiment would like to think it is."

"What does this have to do with Akkek Stratha?" Squids asked.

Eckhart threw caution to the wind. Rixby had already spilled the beans, and Eckhart didn't think Akkek had planned for Aistenz to destroy the *Marathon* and kill everyone on it when she'd extracted

Eckhart's promise not to tell.

"She drank it," he told Aistenz. "She took the Luminous Breath. She can make herself invisible, and she can disintegrate the constituent molecules of herself and anything she touches." He turned his gaze back into the centrifuge. "I'm guessing that's what she did to Ilke."

"That still doesn't help me get her off this ship," Aistenz growled. "You've brought me a completely new problem, Eckhart."

"I realize that, and I'm sorry. As Dallas said, I didn't have anything to do with this."

Aistenz stared into the centrifuge for a while. Eckhart could just imagine what he was thinking right now.

Would Eckhart have to walk away without payment because of this? Would he be flying around with this…whatever it was in his Crick centrifuge for the rest of eternity? He wouldn't be surprised, based on how the rest of his week was going.

While he, Aistenz, and Squids watched, Akkek's face rotated to the front again. Her eyes opened, and she gazed out at each of them in turn.

"Akkek!" Aistenz called to her. "Akkek, answer me!"

Her eyes softened like she understood, but she didn't answer. Her face remained there where they could see it, but she didn't respond.

"This is a disaster!" Aistenz growled. "We have to find a way to remove her from the ship."

"I'm wide open to suggestions," Eckhart replied.

"You'll take the *Marathon* to the Venniria moon and you'll meet with Chyke. He'll find a way to get her out of the ship."

"If there was a way to communicate with Akkek," Dallas interjected, "we might be able to convince her to release Ilke and come out of the centrifuge by herself. If she's restraining Ilke, she might just be waiting for a safe way to release her. Then Akkek could come out."

"Chyke is telepathic," Eckhart told him. "If anyone can communicate with Akkek, Chyke will find a way to do it."

"Exactly." Aistenz turned away. "Come with me, Eckhart."

Eckhart stiffened. "Don't you want me to go see Chyke?"

"I owe you payment for completion of this job. Don't you want to get paid?"

Eckhart's eyes popped out of their sockets. "You want to pay me

now? What about getting Akkek off the ship?"

"You brought her to my safe zone like I asked; therefore you deserve payment."

"But…"

"Just get paid, fool," Alice snarled behind him. "Don't argue."

"Thank you, Alice," Aistenz hissed. "Come along, Eckhart. Akkek isn't going anywhere."

Eckhart followed Squids and Aistenz toward the hatch when a deep rumbling voice startled him. "Eckhart!"

He spun around to see Dallas on his knees. Rixby lay sprawled across the floor, trembling all over.

Eckhart crossed the hold in one leap. "What's wrong with her? Rixby! What's wrong?"

"She's burning up." Alice worked frantically over Rixby's remote workstation. "Her body temperature is triple the normal range for Lemaria."

"She's shaking like a leaf." Dallas gathered Rixby in his arms. "We have to get her to the infirmary."

"Eckhart!" Clifton yelled down the stairs from the upper deck. "Come quick! DeWalt is deteriorating!"

Eckhart vaulted up the stairs three at a time. Dallas followed, carrying Rixby, but Eckhart reached the infirmary first.

DeWalt lay on the exam table, convulsing and jerking violently. Sweat clung to his chalk-white skin and foam bubbled through his clamped teeth in rapid, shallow breaths.

Bing worked over him in a whirlwind of activity while Clifton harassed Bing at every turn. "Help him, damn it! Can't you see he's dying? Do something! Aren't you supposed to be the medic on board?"

"I can't!" Bing yelled back. "There's no cure for what's wrong with him. Don't you get that? We don't even *know* what's wrong with him."

"Is there any way to save him?" Eckhart asked. "Can you bring him back?"

Bing shook his head. He kept adjusting DeWalt's limbs, fixing various pieces of medical equipment to DeWalt's body and hustling over to the internal scanners to check the readings. "I'm afraid Yakit are a one-trick pony. Eplite won't help him. If he dies…"

"He isn't going to die!" Clifton bellowed. "Why are you standing around doing nothing? If we were on a Regiment station, they

would know how to help him."

"The Regiment created this disease," Bing began. "They wouldn't…"

Eckhart raised his hand to stop Bing from saying what he was obviously about to say next, but at that moment, Dallas stormed in carrying Rixby. "She's crashing, too. She stopped breathing on the way up here."

He laid her out on the next table. Bing leapt to the scanners again. "Her temperature is spiking out of control."

"We know that," Eckhart replied. "Is there anything you can do?"

Bing cast one last look at the scanners and sprang to Rixby's side. "She's not breathing. We have to resuscitate her."

He grabbed an oxygen mask and slipped it over Rixby's head. He attached it to a furry place on her round body, but she didn't have any visible nose or mouth that anyone could see.

Bing started pumping air into her, and Rixby's body expanded with every pump. She exhaled when he released the bag.

Squids entered the infirmary, leading Aistenz. "Transfer your crewmen to my hospital," Aistenz ordered. "I have trained doctors and a full surgical theater. They can help your crewmen better there."

"Where is it?" Eckhart asked. "How can we transfer them there as quickly as possible?"

Squids started to answer, but at that moment, both DeWalt and Rixby vanished. They evaporated off the exam tables, leaving Rixby's respiratory mask behind. It bounced on the table, but she was nowhere to be seen.

"What the hell!" Clifton exclaimed. "Where are they? Get DeWalt back now!"

Bing and Eckhart stared at the two empty exam tables, but Dallas turned his head to one side. "I'm receiving a signal through my helmet. The registrar at Aistenz's hospital ward acknowledges receipt of two patients from the *Marathon*." He straightened up and faced Eckhart. "They're in the hospital."

"But… how?" Bing whispered. "Aistenz barely said the words, and then…"

"Akkek did this," Eckhart replied. "She must have."

"This is highly out of order, Eckhart," Aistenz hissed.

"I know. Believe me, I know."

Aistenz examined him for so long that Eckhart seriously started to fear for his life, but in the end, Aistenz only turned away. “Follow me, Eckhart. I want to talk to you.”

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8

Eckhart stumbled after Squids and Aistenz. His mind churned in a daze over everything that had happened to him since…well, since forever.

He tried to remember when it had started. Did it start when Clifton and DeWalt came on board, or did it start a long time ago? Did it start when he first left Parilia?

His brain didn't seem to function well enough for him to figure it out. His worst fear right now was that it would just keep on going. Maybe life would keep firing these torturous disasters at him forever and he would never get a day off ever again. Maybe he would just keep running until one of these forces chasing him finally caught up and killed him.

That outcome was starting to sound pretty damn good about now, with Aistenz Trotaer leading him out of the *Marathon* toward his safe house compound. Eckhart could just imagine Aistenz leading him to his death. He wouldn't be surprised, and he almost wished for it.

Instead, Aistenz guided him over to one of the giant Colossuses parked on the tarmac. The hatch stood open, but Aistenz didn't go inside. He paused outside and turned to Eckhart. "Do you still have the payment card I gave you, Eckhart, the one with access to my unlimited bank account?"

"Yeah. I still have it, but it's back on the *Marathon*. I can get it for you."

"I don't want you to get it for me. I want you to keep it."

"Why?" Eckhart asked. "Don't tell me you want me to do another job for you. I told you getting Akkek out of prison was a one-time thing."

"I don't have another job for you—unless you want one. The card is your payment. You can use it to buy whatever you want."

Eckhart frowned. "How much is on it?"

"I told you, Eckhart. The account is unlimited. You can keep the card as long as you need it. You can use it for any supplies, recreation, or goods you wish. It's yours."

Eckhart shut his eyes. He didn't expect this, and he didn't know

how to react. He should be happy. He should be relieved. He should be *delighted*.

His crew should be delighted, too. They could take the card to Imeliv H8 and go on the spree of their lives.

Imeliv H8. Akkek wanted to go to Imeliv H8. She wanted to use these new powers of hers to stop the Regiment from harming the fringe aliens.

She'd challenged Eckhart to do the same thing. In a way, he'd been doing exactly that ever since he left the Regiment at Kruvin.

The crew wouldn't be happy about having an unlimited payment card from Aistenz, either. Eckhart didn't have to ask them. He already knew they wouldn't be happy about it.

They wouldn't want to go on a spree at Imeliv H8. He could just imagine what they would say.

Alice. Dallas. Bing. Rixby.

Rixby was in the hospital. The first question they would ask was how she was doing.

The second question they would ask would be whether Eckhart had secured the Oksite crystal.

He was the only Earthling on the *Marathon* crew. Clifton and DeWalt didn't really count. The four of them were Eckhart's closest friends in the world, and each of them stood to suffer if the Regiment succeeded in their murderous plan.

The four of them wouldn't want to hear about any unlimited payment card until they knew the crystal no longer posed a threat to them and their species.

He owed them that much. He couldn't show his face on the *Marathon* until he made sure his friends were safe—until he made sure the whole alien population was safe. He wouldn't be able to sleep with the crystal still out there.

"You're thinking about the crystal," Aistenz rasped. "I keep my promises, Eckhart. We will destroy the crystal and you will be there to see it destroyed. You will see it become nothing, where no one will ever be able to use it."

"What do you have in mind?" Eckhart asked. "Is the crystal here?"

"It is nearby. Once you extract Akkek from your ship, I will take you and your crew to Betrun."

Eckhart snapped out of his thoughts and every hair stood on end. "Betrun! What's there?"

Aistenz chuckled low under his breath and his wings buzzed faster. “Athroth Sov is on Betrun.”

A tiny voice in the back of Eckhart’s mind whispered, *Don’t ask. Get out now. Don’t go through with it. Stop this before it goes too far.*

Aistenz couldn’t hear that voice, and he kept speaking before Eckhart could stop him. “We’ll take the crystal to Betrun and launch it into the atmosphere. We’ll detonate the crystal in the atmosphere and rid the fringes of Athroth Sov forever. Will that satisfy you?”

Eckhart shut his eyes again, but his optic nerves still projected the view across the landing area onto his retinas. He saw the enormous Colossuses stationed around the cluster of buildings. DeWalt and Rixby were in there. Were they still alive?

No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t erase Aistenz’s words from his mind. Athroth Sov. Betrun. The Oksite crystal.

If Eckhart had to pick one person to die in an Oksite blast, it would be Athroth Sov. Hell, if he played his cards right, Eckhart might even pin Zels Ariat’s murder on Athroth. The Lion Tribe would accept that without a word of protest.

Squids stepped forward and laid his hand on Eckhart’s shoulder. “Take Akkek to Chyke, and bring her and Ilke back here. Or, if you prefer, you can deal with Ilke in your own way. Just bring Akkek back here, and then we’ll deal with the crystal.”

Squids and Aistenz went into the Colossus and left Eckhart standing there. He stood motionless even after the hatch shut.

What should he do? Should he stop Aistenz from detonating the crystal on Betrun? Wasn’t that what Eckhart wanted—for the crystal to be destroyed and maybe take out a few fringe scumbags in the process?

He wandered back to the *Marathon* and went to the bridge. The internal scanners showed him Bing, Alice, and Dallas in the galley. Clifton must have gone over to the hospital with DeWalt.

Eckhart had only these three left. He felt so much poorer without Rixby, and when he thought about it, he included Akkek, Clifton, and DeWalt in that, too. They were part of his crew now, without even trying.

Akkek had been on board for less than a week, but he already hated to lose her. He hadn’t even really lost her, and yet he suffered from her loss.

He didn’t even really care about how much she could help him in battle. Her value lay elsewhere, even if he couldn’t articulate

exactly what that value was. He hated to take any step that might separate him from her, but he had to. Whatever happened between her and Ilke had to be undone.

How could she transport Rixby and DeWalt to the hospital like that if she didn't know exactly what was going on all over the ship? She must have heard Aistenz tell the *Marathon* crew to transfer them. She must have. There was no other explanation.

He fired up the engines and launched off the planet. He detected a few Silent Death ships buzzing around their base on the southern continent, but when several Colossuses took off from Aistenz's landing area, the Silent Death retreated. Good, the rotten sons of bitches.

He headed for the Venniria moon and entered orbit when Alice strolled in. She sat down at her station and didn't glance once at Rixby's workstation.

That deliberate lack of acknowledgment brought Rixby's absence into Eckhart's awareness more than anything else could. The bridge felt cold and lonely without her at his side. Would she ever come back?

He dropped the *Marathon* into a stable orbit around the moon and cut the engines. He leaned back in his chair to wait.

As soon as he did that, an alien face projected into his mind. Long white hair hung from every part of the skull, cheekbones, jaw, and nose. Smoldering white eyes burned out of the sockets.

The face didn't move when the alien spoke. The voice came from forgotten memories from Eckhart's distant past.

Eckhart.

Chyke.

Aistenz wishes me to contact Akkek Stratha on your ship.

Yes. He does.

Alice turned around to watch Eckhart. Did she hear Chyke's voice, or did she just recognize the signs that Eckhart was talking to him?

Akkek's face appeared in Eckhart's mind alongside Chyke's. *Don't take me off the ship, Eckhart.*

I have to. Aistenz is furious that I can't deliver you to him.

Don't take me off this ship, Eckhart, she repeated. *This is the only way to stop Ilke.*

Stop Ilke? Why do you have to stop Ilke?

You have to tell Aistenz that the Bloody Blossoms are in league with

the Regiment to wipe out the fringe aliens. You have to tell Aistenz to break his alliance with the Bloody Blossoms.

Eckhart stiffened. *He won't do that. Alliances are everything to him.*

Why do you think Ilke has gone to such lengths to betray you and interfere with your missions? The Bloody Blossoms made an agreement with the Regiment.

What agreement?

When the Regiment launches their annihilation assault on the fringe aliens, they'll alert the Bloody Blossoms so the Bloody Blossoms can reach a safe distance. The Mozari will be the only alien race to survive.

Eckhart snorted. *Only if the Regiment keeps its word. If they want to destroy* all *aliens, they would only have to break their word and not warn the Bloody Blossoms beforehand.*

Akkek smiled in her soft, congenial way. *Exactly. Now listen to me, Eckhart. I can't leave the ship. I'm the only thing preventing Ilke from selling all of you out to the Regiment. If I release her now, she'll break free and alert the Regiment that you and Aistenz plan to destroy the crystal.*

Why can't you just release her and we kill her on the spot? Wouldn't that be easier?

In a way, yes. This is what we're going to do, Eckhart. You're going to travel to Betrun with Aistenz. When he prepares to discharge the crystal into the atmosphere, I will drop out of the Marathon *still holding Ilke. The* Marathon *and Aistenz's Colossus fleet will open fire and destroy Ilke and the crystal at the same time. Do you understand?*

If we do it that way, you'll be killed along with her.

She smiled again. *It's a small price to pay to keep the fringes safe.*

Are you satisfied? Chyke cut in. *Do you still require my intervention?*

Tell Aistenz, Eckhart, Akkek told him. *Tell him everything I just said.*

He won't like it.

I trust you to convince him. He'll listen to you. Akkek vanished and left Eckhart facing Chyke.

Thank you, Chyke. I appreciate your help.

Chyke vanished too, and Eckhart collapsed back in his seat, all his energy drained. "This is the last thing I need," he muttered.

"What is it with you, anyway?" Alice asked from her station.

Eckhart burst into exhausted laughter. "I ask myself that all the time."

“And what answer do you come up with?”

“I don’t. I don’t know why this shit keeps happening to me. I just know…” He broke off. What exactly *did* he know?

There had to be another way to get Akkek and Ilke off his ship. He just couldn’t think of how to do it besides blowing the ship to kingdom come with both of them on board.

Athroth Sov would do it that way. Aistenz would do it that way. A dozen other crime lords on the fringes would do it that way. They wouldn’t screw around with a trip to Betrun and whatever other lunatic scheme Akkek came up with.

“So what are you gonna do?” Alice asked.

Eckhart rubbed his eyes. He needed to sleep for about eight years until all this nonsense blew over. “I guess I’ll tell Aistenz. That’s what she wants me to do.”

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9

Eckhart tapped out a signal on his regulators. A communications channel opened between the *Marathon* and the colossus where Squids and Aistenz appeared before him.

"Did you do it?" Aistenz rasped. "Did you get Akkek Stratha off your ship?"

"I'm sending you a message from her. She wants me to tell you her plans."

"I am not interested in her plans," Aistenz hissed. "I sent you to the Venniria moon to do one simple task, Eckhart. I do not tolerate ineptitude."

"I'm not inept. You'll understand the message when you read it."

He entered it into the communications channel, and Squids frowned when he read it. "This is…"

"I have another favor to ask, Aistenz," Eckhart interrupted, "as part of my payment for getting her out of the Silvercloud Vault."

"We already discussed that," Aistenz countered. "You have your payment and we're going to destroy the crystal. There is nothing more."

"There is one thing. I'll go to Betrun and we'll detonate the crystal like you said, but I have one condition."

"What is it?" Aistenz asked.

"I want you to let me transport the crystal on the *Marathon*. I'll take it to Betrun and *I* will be the one to deploy it into the atmosphere."

Aistenz hesitated only a moment. "Agreed. We'll carry out the plan in every detail as you outlined it. We will launch in—"

"Hold it, Eckhart interrupted. "I want my people back."

"Your people? What people?"

"Clifton, DeWalt, and Rixby."

"DeWalt is too unstable to move," Squids told him, "and Clifton refuses to leave his bedside."

"They'll be perfectly safe here," Aistenz chimed in. "You can check on them when we get back from Betrun."

Eckhart grimaced. He had a bad feeling about leaving them on the planet, even with Aistenz's entourage taking care of DeWalt.

“What about Rixby? Is she stable?”

“She’s fine,” Squids replied. “Land on the tarmac and you can pick her up.”

Eckhart frowned. “Are you sure? Is there anything wrong with her?”

“Her body temperature is still elevated,” Squids replied. “Other than that, the medics can’t find any sign of medical problems at all. She’s been driving the doctors insane by demanding to return to the *Marathon*. You should get her out of the hospital as soon as possible, Eckhart.”

“It’s the same thing that happened to DeWalt,” Alice murmured from her station. “He improved and then deteriorated. If we take her off the planet now, she could crash while we’re en route.”

“I’m trusting my gut on this one.” He turned back to Aistenz. “Send her out on the tarmac, and then we can go to Betrun.”

Aistenz signed off, and Eckhart steered the *Marathon* back to the landing area. He descended into his old place and spotted Rixby waddling out of the hospital even before he set down.

“You’re playing a game with her life, you know,” Alice hissed. “You should leave her here.”

“I’d take Clifton and DeWalt, too, if I had a choice.” He let go of the regulators and stood up. “Take over and keep the guns primed.”

“What for? We’re surrounded by Aistenz’s Colossuses. We’re safe here.”

“Just do it to put my mind at ease, okay? Something’s off here.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know.” He scowled at the front screen. Rixby was getting closer, and she carried a bundle wrapped in fabric. Aistenz must have given her the crystal.

Alice was right. The terrain looked benign and peaceful out there. Eckhart’s most powerful allies surrounded the *Marathon*. No one would dare attack here, but that only heightened his sense of misgiving. Was he getting paranoid in his old age?

He left the bridge and went downstairs just as Rixby arrived at the hatch. She handed up the bundle.

“How was the hospital?” Eckhart asked.

“Boring. They don’t have any good reading material.”

Eckhart laughed. “You mean they didn’t have any databases online for you to find information you don’t already know.”

“Of course. I’m surprised Aistenz can run his organization with

such a weak flow of information."

She padded past him and entered the ship, no doubt to return to the bridge. She'd be back on top of her workstation any second now, but Eckhart didn't go back to the bridge. He was in no hurry to get to Betrun, even if it meant destroying the crystal.

He went over to the Crick centrifuge and watched Akkek and Ilke merging, adjusting their positions, and becoming transparent again.

The best-case scenario for the plan going forward was that Akkek would be killed. There had to be a better way to deal with Ilke and stop the Bloody Blossoms from selling out the fringe aliens.

Eckhart would give a lot to talk to her alone—without Ilke listening in. He'd started to value Akkek as one of his own crew. He hated to lose her, especially when he still thought that killing her was so avoidable.

Engine noise brought him back to the hatch to see Dallas and Bing returning from one of the Colossuses. They laughed to each other. They must have been taking a look around Aistenz's compound. Eckhart didn't begrudge them a little time off.

"What were you two up to?" he asked when they reached him. "No good, I'm sure."

"Just a little galactic mayhem and sabotage," Bing joked.

"Don't let me find out you sabotaged any of Aistenz's ships," Eckhart replied.

"No way. We were just stealing food from the commissary."

"If by stealing it you mean sweet-talking a pretty nurse into giving you extra," Dallas cut in.

"Can I help it if I'm a charming lady-killer?" Bing countered. "They fall all over me in every port."

Eckhart laughed. "Enjoy it while it lasts, buddy. You'll have no one to talk to but Alice for the next several light years."

Dallas guffawed loudly and clapped Bing on the shoulder. "You wouldn't want *her* falling all over you."

Bing looked away, and Dallas and Eckhart shared a laugh at his expense. "Get inside, you two," Eckhart told them. "We're taking off."

Wind and dust whipped across the landing area from the big Colossus engines as Aistenz's fleet fired up. Eckhart started to turn away, but he hesitated. Leaving this planet meant going back into danger.

Did he make a mistake, feeling some threat here? He still didn't see anything on the horizon out there. Maybe he should listen to Alice and leave Rixby behind. Maybe he should let Aistenz take the crystal to Betrun and keep the *Marathon* here.

It was too late to back out on this plan now. He turned for the second time to follow Dallas and Bing into the ship when an almighty blast smacked him in the side. A supernova of heat and exploding rubble flattened him to the hold floor as one of the Colossuses detonated in an unholy ball of fire.

He scrambled to his feet, and the *Marathon* shuddered as Alice fired the engines to full power. She would launch any second now. He had to get inside.

He pushed himself to his feet and broke for the cargo hold. He cast one last look behind him, and his insides dropped as a barrage of rockets plummeted out of the atmosphere. They smashed into the hospital, and the whole building went up in a mushroom cloud of billowing fire, smoke, and dust.

"*No!*" he screamed, and dove through the hatch just as it started to close. He sprinted across the tarmac, dodging Colossuses launching, exploding, and firing their guns into the atmosphere all at once.

He dove into the mayhem in a hopeless bid to reach the hospital. His mind refused to accept that Clifton and DeWalt were still inside. He would have run straight into the heart of the fire, but Dallas caught him from behind.

Eckhart kicked and fought to break Dallas' grip, but nothing budged those powerful Crionium appendages.

Dallas muscled Eckhart back toward the *Marathon*. "Come on! It's too late! You can't save them."

"*No!*" Eckhart bellowed, and tried to kick Dallas. "Let me go!"

Dallas muttered something in Eckhart's ear, but Eckhart didn't hear him. He had to save Clifton and DeWalt. He didn't know who'd attacked Aistenz's compound, but he couldn't let the Regiment win. All his efforts to save DeWalt's life couldn't go for nothing.

Dallas backed up the ramp, and it closed in front of Eckhart's eyes. Alice launched the ship, but Eckhart didn't stop struggling. He finally broke free from Dallas's arms...or maybe Dallas let him go.

Eckhart crashed onto the floor. Dallas planted himself over Eckhart, glaring down at him through his helmet. His single optic piece scrutinized Eckhart without blinking. "Get to the bridge,

Eckhart," Dallas snarled. "Your crew still needs you."

Eckhart gritted his teeth. His shattered brain whirled for some way to fight Dallas, to make Dallas let him go back out there and look for Clifton and DeWalt.

Dallas must have read his mind. He took one menacing step toward Eckhart and a soft buzzing noise came from his armor.

Eckhart knew that sound. It was the unmistakable sound of Dallas's internal Datrium pumps kicking in. He was charging Datrium to his assault guns, but he didn't extend them…yet.

Eckhart crab-walked away from him, and Dallas advanced one more ominous step.

"Get to the bridge, Eckhart," Dallas almost whispered. "I won't tell you again."

Eckhart gulped. No way could he fight Dallas. That just wasn't going to happen, and Dallas meant business. Eckhart never doubted that. Dallas would stand up to Eckhart if he had to, and this situation definitely called for it.

Another shuddering crash snapped Eckhart out of his stupor. More shots battered the hull. The ship was under attack.

Eckhart whirled away and streaked up the stairs to find Alice sitting in his seat. Rixby stood on her workstation, calling out reports.

"Fourteen Megaliths taking up positions around the planet. They're targeting Silent Death *and* Aistenz's compound. They're carpet-bombing everything!"

"Megaliths!" Eckhart interjected. "What are they doing here?"

"Carpet-bombing everything," she repeated. "Five Colossuses hit."

"Is Aistenz away?" Eckhart asked.

"His Colossus is in the air. He's fighting to get through the blockade." Rixby looked up and met Eckhart's gaze. "He can't break through with so many of them around."

Eckhart searched the tactical web flashing in front of Alice. She steered the *Marathon* in and out of the Megaliths' shots, but she still couldn't fight her way through to open space beyond.

"Twenty more Megaliths coming in!" Rixby reported. "This must have been the advance wave."

More explosions rocked the ship as the Megaliths' plasma rockets pounded the hull. "Celdian at 65%!" Rixby reported.

"Will you shut up with the statistics?" Alice bellowed. "Just find

me a way through."

"There *is* no way through…except…" Rixby attacked her workstation, tapping every button in sight. "Silent Death, Alice!"

"What about them?" Alice thundered. "Speak English, for Christ's sake!"

"The incoming Megaliths are thinner directly over the Silent Death base. You can break through there."

"Silent Death will target us there," Eckhart pointed out.

"To hell with it!" Alice slammed the regulators hard to starboard. She veered around several Colossuses and hit the throttle to the wall, streaking for the Silent Death base.

"Eckhart!" Aistenz appeared on the communications channel. "Don't you dare run off and abandon me—not after everything I've done for you!"

Eckhart raced over to Alice's seat and stuck his face in front of the display. "Get to the Silent Death base now! You can break through the Megalith blockade there."

"We can't!" Squids cried from out of sight. "We can't maneuver fast enough to break away!"

"We're going down out here, Eckhart!" Aistenz called. "Do something!"

Eckhart hesitated and then turned to Alice. "Get to the Silent Death base. Get into orbit as fast as you can."

"Eckhart!" Aistenz screamed. "You traitor!"

Eckhart turned away. Rixby stood still and stared at Eckhart in horror. "You're just going to leave them here to die?"

Alice didn't respond. She concentrated her hollow eye sockets on the tactical web. She fought the regulators, cutting between Colossuses and Megalith alike.

Eckhart pointed at Rixby. "Contact as many Colossuses as you can. Tell them to stay as low to the planet's surface as possible."

"What for?" Rixby squeaked.

"Better yet, tell them to get on the ground if they can. Tell them to be ready to flee as soon as the Megaliths break the line."

He bolted as soon as he finished speaking. He didn't have time to discuss his plan—his new plan.

He dashed down the stairs, dodged Dallas, and charged for the Baswalt ejection port. He fumbled the crystal out of his pocket on the run, stuffed it into the port, and slammed it shut.

He was panting hard by the time he got back to the bridge. Alice

blasted away from the Megaliths and hurtled over the Silent Death base.

"Get up!" Eckhart gasped. "I'm taking over."

Alice hesitated to let go of the regulators until he grabbed her arm and physically pried her out of his chair. He flung himself into it, seized the regulators, and ripped the *Marathon* into a vertical climb. He pushed the engines to their limit just as the incoming Megaliths descended to close the dragnet.

Eckhart locked his jaws and narrowed his eyes at the nearest Megalith. He aimed the *Marathon* straight for the massive ship's nose, and the engines shrieked as he slotted into a collision course.

The Megalith ceased to be a giant ship. Eckhart zeroed in on the bridge window. He could just make out the bridge staff scurrying around trying to decide how to deal with him. The *Marathon* was too close now. They couldn't destroy the ship without risking their own vessel.

He veered at the last second and careened into open space behind the blockade, but he didn't look back. Rixby no longer gave him reports on the battle raging behind him. None of that mattered now.

He sprinted high into orbit and rocketed around the planet back to Aistenz's compound—or what was left of it.

The Colossuses of Aistenz's fleet still struggled to break the Megalith blockade. The Megaliths bombarded the planet in a blitzkrieg assault that left nothing alive down there.

Eckhart caught himself searching for the hospital ruins and immediately pushed those thoughts away. He couldn't help Clifton and DeWalt. Thinking about them would only slow him down.

He skidded the *Marathon* sideways, slammed the regulators into reverse, and ejected the waste from the latrine system. A disgusting slurry of sewage and Baswalt billowed from the *Marathon*'s underside.

The ship's sudden direction change kept the Baswalt moving toward the planet, and the crystal rotated in the center of the mess. This wasn't the way Eckhart had pictured getting rid of it, but it was the best way to save Aistenz and his crew.

The Baswalt drifted closer to the atmosphere. Eckhart couldn't let it enter the ionosphere. If he was going to destroy it, he had to do it now.

He pivoted the plasma ports toward the Baswalt and fired. The

waste scattered into a million droplets of toxic waste, and the crystal detonated in a massive concussion.

The shockwave slapped the *Marathon* away with such force that it ripped Eckhart's hands off the regulators. The ship tumbled end over end, and Rixby flew off her workstation.

Eckhart pitched out of his seat and cartwheeled across the bridge. Alice hauled him off the floor and propelled him back to his chair. "We're clear! We have to get out of here before the remaining Megaliths regroup!"

Eckhart stumbled back to his seat and searched his instruments for any sign of the battle. The crystal exploding had incinerated all the Megaliths on this side of the planet.

A giant swath of scorched terrain covered the planet's surface below where the shockwave had hit it, but Eckhart's calculations proved correct. Exploding the crystal in the outer orbit hadn't destroyed the whole planet.

No Colossuses remained on this side of the planet. Had Eckhart killed Aistenz Trotaer along with the Megaliths? Did Eckhart have that death to add to his score, too?

A few Colossuses still grappled with the remaining Megaliths over by the Silent Death base. Was one of them Aistenz's Colossus? Eckhart couldn't hope it was. His luck just wasn't that good.

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10

Eckhart went down to the galley to find Dallas, Bing, Rixby, and Alice already there. Eckhart had spent the last several hours alone in his quarters, but as Dallas had impressed on him in not so many words, he couldn't change what had already happened.

Punishing himself wouldn't bring Clifton and DeWalt back, and what did he have to punish himself for anyway? It wasn't his fault.

"It's just as well you blew that crystal after you ejected the Baswalt," Bing was saying. "If you'd left it in the ejection port much longer, it would have blown up while it was still on the ship and then we really would have been in trouble."

"Your toxic shits would have blown it up," Dallas teased. "When are you gonna start keeping your trash to yourself, pal?"

"He'd become more destructive than the Oksite if he did," Rixby chimed in. "He would blow up like a balloon ready to pop at any second."

"Maybe the Regiment can take you to one of their mystery labs, Bing," Alice added. "They can experiment with your diet until you become a doomsday weapon against the fringe aliens."

"He's already a doomsday weapon against his crewmates," Dallas went on. "How long do you think it will take before you poison us all with your caustic fumes?"

The room exploded in laughter. Eckhart had to join in. He couldn't help himself.

He'd been flying with this crew for years. These four meant the world to him. Clifton and DeWalt were just passengers, even if they had come to matter to him. He should be grateful he still had his original four and they could all still laugh together.

He caught Bing and Rixby both glancing at him, but no one mentioned Clifton and DeWalt. Did his crew feel their loss as much as he did? Why shouldn't they? Who did Eckhart think he was fooling? He wasn't the only person on this crew with a heart.

"So where are we going next?" Dallas asked.

Eckhart shrugged. "I guess we'll go to Parilia and do this job for the Lion Tribe."

"Are you sure you want to do that?" Rixby asked. "It's

dangerous."

"Not as dangerous as *not* doing the job. I already accepted it. I have to follow it through."

"How will you do that?" Bing asked. "You'd have to lie to the Lion Tribe about who they're really looking for."

"If any of you has any ideas, I'm all ears." Eckhart sat down at the table and opened one of his ration packs. "Does any of you have any enemies you'd like to see meet a slow and painful death?"

Bing laughed. "Just pull up the Regiment roster and take your pick."

"Killing one person won't stop the Regiment," Alice hissed, "and the Lion Tribe would never believe the Regiment killed Zels Ariat. The Regiment doesn't conduct hits on individual criminals, no matter how highly placed they are."

"No, they just carry out hits on the whole alien population," Dallas added.

"They haven't done it yet," Eckhart pointed out. "We've managed to stop them so far."

"You call this stopping them?" Alice snorted. "We haven't done anything to stop them."

"We've helped the people who've been trying to stop them. We helped Akkek, and she stopped them several times."

"And now we're going to kill her for it."

Eckhart stabbed his fork into his rations and didn't answer. He couldn't argue with anything Alice said.

"How do you plan to carry out your supposed investigation once you get to Parilia?" Dallas asked.

"I guess I'll start by asking questions. I'll talk to anyone who might know something about Zels' death."

"Does *anyone* know anything about Zels' death?" Bing asked. "Does anyone on Parilia know who really killed Zels?"

"As far as I know," Eckhart replied, "no one knows except Aistenz."

Silence descended at the mention of Aistenz's name. So this was how it was going to be. No one would talk about the people the crew lost. Did Aistenz die thinking Eckhart had betrayed him, or worse, that Eckhart was the one who'd actually killed him?

"And we have no way now of getting Akkek and Ilke off the ship," Dallas finally pointed out.

"Not unless one of you suddenly became psychic and forgot to

tell me," Eckhart replied.

Bing raised one of his limbs. "I became psychic last week, Eckhart. I just forgot to tell you until right now. I had a few other things on my mind."

"Like how to survive his own smell," Alice snarled.

"Like how to move his bowels without blowing up the ship," Rixby added, and the whole crew laughed.

"Seriously," Bing went on. "There has to be a way to communicate with her."

"If there was, she would have communicated with *us* by now, shithead," Alice fired back. "She would have stuck her head out of Ilke's ass when we were all standing around staring at her. Then she would have told us what we had to do to cap that traitorous bitch."

"What about killing Ilke on our own?" Bing asked. "Isn't there any poison on record that's deadly to Mozari and not to Akeix? We could fire the poison into both of them and stand by to watch the fireworks."

Eckhart glanced over at Rixby. "What about it? Is there any such poison?"

"Only in Bing's pipe dreams. Anyway, the issue isn't just killing Ilke and saving Akkek."

"How do you figure?" Dallas asked.

"When Akkek made herself and Ilke…less than solid, shall we say, they merged with the ship. Only Akkek can remove them. We're stuck until she decides to release Ilke."

"Are they damaging the ship at all?" Eckhart asked. "Are they interfering with any of the ship's systems?"

"Not yet," Rixby replied, "but it isn't out of the realm of possibility."

"That's crap," Alice snapped. "Akkek knows exactly where she is. She imprisoned Ilke in a part of the ship where she wouldn't do any damage. That was the whole point of her binding Ilke—to stop her from interfering with the ship's functions."

"She's in the Crick centrifuge," Bing pointed out. "We definitely need *that* function."

"But they aren't stopping the Crick centrifuge from functioning." Eckhart glanced over at Rixby again. "Are they?"

"No. Not at all."

'That's good." Eckhart finished his rations and tossed the packaging. "We'll be in orbit on Parilia in another thirty-six hours. I

want you people to keep a low profile on the planet. If you have to get out and socialize, try to keep it low-key. Don't attract too much attention to the fact that you work for me."

"None of us wants to do that, trust me," Bing teased. "None of us wants anyone to know we work for you."

They laughed again and Eckhart left the galley, but he didn't know what to do or where to go. He could think of half a dozen systems on the ship that needed fine-tuning, or at least maintenance checks.

He could spend the rest of their flight to Parilia working on the ship. He would have done that at any other time, but he couldn't get enthusiastic about it now. He didn't feel like doing anything.

He'd wandered back to the stairs when Rixby called him from the lower deck corridor. "Eckhart…wait up."

He paused with his foot on the lowest stair. "What's up? Are you feeling okay?"

She waddled over and placed herself directly in front of him. She looked fine. She examined him from the end of her antennae. "I just thought you'd like to know…my body temperature is back to normal."

He blinked at her. "It is? How did that happen?"

"I don't know for sure, but if I had to guess, I'd say whatever DeWalt had must have spread to me while he was on board. His condition affected me, and it's gone now that he's gone."

She waited a second longer to let this sink in, and then she left to go back to the galley. She left Eckhart spinning in confusion. He couldn't be happy that DeWalt was gone, not even now that he knew Rixby was safe because of DeWalt's death.

With nothing left to do, he went to the bridge and pulled up charts, documents, and newsreels on Parilia. He'd started going through them when Dallas clomped onto the bridge.

Eckhart looked up from his study. "What brings you to the upper echelons?"

Dallas nodded toward the documents displayed on the regulators. "What are you doing?"

"Just doing some research for this job."

"Research," Dallas repeated. "You don't need to research the place. You were born and raised there."

"I thought I ought to brush up on the local news. I haven't been back since I left. I'm out of the loop—not that I ever wanted to go

back. What am I saying? I don't want to go back now."

"Why are you, then?" Dallas asked. "You don't need the money, now that you have an unlimited bank account courtesy of Aistenz."

"I'm going back to save my own life. I wouldn't set foot on the planet otherwise." He made a face at his readouts. "No amount of money is worth this."

"Is it really as bad as that?"

Eckhart scrolled through the documents skimming them. "Man, this brings back memories! I was hoping I'd never have to remember any of this. See? The Lion Tribe doesn't even hardly have any presence on the planet anymore."

"So who's in charge?"

"It looks like a power struggle between the Chosen and the Immortals—nothing we can't handle."

"So how long has it been since you left?"

"Well, I left when I was seventeen and I'm…" Eckhart hesitated and then grinned at his friend. "We don't need to talk about the actual numbers."

Dallas laughed. "Way to change the subject."

Eckhart scowled at the documents. Names, places, businesses, connections, gangs, schools, and events flooded his mind. Why in the name of God was he going back there?

"So what's the news?" Dallas asked. "Does the Regiment have a presence on Parilia? I don't know anything about the place."

"The Regiment never touched Parilia. It's too poor," Eckhart explained. "That's the Regiment's excuse, at least. The truth is, the criminal elements on the planet are too strong for the Regiment even to show their faces. The planet doesn't have any law enforcement except whatever rule the criminal organizations choose to enforce."

"But you left," Dallas pointed out. "How did you get away?"

Eckhart drifted into a deluge of memories. "At least half the population lives at or near the starvation level. Their one aim in life is to find, steal, or scavenge enough food every day to keep themselves alive. They don't care what the criminal groups do amongst themselves."

Dallas gasped. "And you grew up like that? Jesus!"

"Not many make it out. Not many even think about leaving. I spent fifteen years living hand to mouth, and then I spent the next two years scheming for ways to get off the planet."

“What did you do—I mean, apart from killing Zels? How did you get assigned the hit?”

“I helped a local drug runner who accidentally blundered into the wrong part of town. Four starving teenage girls cornered him and robbed him of his money.”

Dallas laughed. “Lucky him.”

“Crimes like that go down all the time—at least when someone winds up in the wrong place at the wrong time. The girls probably would have let him go, but he made another big mistake. He threatened to get his boss to find and punish them.”

“Let me guess. They didn’t take it very well.”

“They decided to kill him, dismember him, and sell his body parts for meat in another slum. They wouldn’t have had any trouble finding buyers. The drug runner started to panic when I happened along. I recognized him as one of Aistenz Trotaer’s crew, and I drove the girls off. He was, as they say, extremely grateful, and he introduced me to Aistenz.”

“Still,” Dallas pointed out. “Why would Aistenz give a teenage kid a job like that? Didn’t he have anyone else more experienced?”

“I told him I wanted to leave Parilia. I told him I was willing to do anything to get out. He told me later that he thought I would get killed, and then he wouldn’t have to deal with me anymore. He thought it was a convenient way to get me off his hands and erase the obligation he owed me for saving his man.”

“But you carried out the hit.”

Eckhart nodded. “He had to pay me…and he never forgot me.”

He glanced over at his friend. He would never get another chance to say what was on his mind. “If anything happens to me on Parilia…”

Dallas stiffened. “What could happen to you on Parilia?”

“I’m just saying. If anything happens to me, take the crew and the *Marathon* and get out.”

“Do you have enemies down there?”

“Not that I know of. I just want you to take charge and get the crew to safety. Understand?”

“Alice would be better for that. She knows how to fly the ship. I don’t.”

“She’ll listen to you.”

“She will not! She’ll go after you.”

“Then you’ll just have to stop her. Don’t risk the crew because of

me.”

Dallas snorted. “Keep dreaming, sonny. No one is leaving you behind.”

Eckhart smiled. “I guess it doesn’t matter, because nothing is gonna happen down there.”

Dallas studied the front screen for a moment. It showed the stars gliding past the ship. “Why do you think the Megaliths attacked Pheste? They couldn’t have been after Aistenz.”

“Maybe they were after Silent Death. The Megaliths have plenty of enemies.”

Dallas studied him through his optic piece. “That still doesn’t explain it.”

“Why do the Megaliths do anything? We’re out of it now.”

Dallas fell silent. That silence bothered Eckhart more than their conversation so far. That conversation covered a whole lot of territory Eckhart would rather not deal with, but with Parilia coming up fast, he had no choice but to confront it now.

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11

"Remember what I said." Eckhart slung his backpack over his shoulder and squinted toward the city of Olratha. The sight made him ill. "Stay on board the ship. If you really want to get out and look around, keep your identities on the down-low."

Alice scanned the city and hissed through her mask. "Who would want to get out and look around at *this*?"

Rixby turned away and started padding back inside the cargo hold. "I have studying to do on the bridge. I doubt there's a single database worth studying on this whole planet."

"Be careful," Dallas told Eckhart. "If you have any trouble, contact me immediately. You have your receiver."

Eckhart patted his backpack. "Right here. I'll be fine. I'll see you soon." He pointed to the *Marathon*. "Take care of my ship for me."

He headed off and started walking into town. The closer he got to it, the more his memories took over. He found it harder and harder to remember that he was an independent businessman with his own ship, his own crew, and a whole life off this planet.

Olratha looked exactly the way he remembered it. Nothing had changed. How many times had he approached the town's outer walls from this direction? How many times had he seen the sun baking on the high stone towers, buildings, warehouses, hangars, and residential blocks? He knew every structure, every door and window. He knew everyone who lived inside and all their business and criminal connections—the ones who were still alive, at least.

The *Marathon* dwindled to a distant dream. Someone else might have been living his life for the last twenty-five years.

He could so easily have been stuck here all his life. If he hadn't done the hit on Zels Ariat, he would have been. What would he be if he had stayed? Who would he have been?

He was about to find out. He crossed the Outer Ring, a field of about a mile of concrete surrounding the town. Ships dotted the Ring, with aliens, gunrunners, drug importers, and merchants working on their vessels.

He approached the main entrance gate leading through the walls to the town beyond. Four giant Bigawa guards stood sentry on

either side, holding giant pounders in their massive arms.

They grunted at him when he got near the security station. A metal slot opened next to the gate and he stuck his hand inside.

Warm radiation crisscrossed his skin and a prickle went up his arm. He could just imagine the flurry of activity on the other side when whoever was manning the security feed realized who it was.

A screen blipped on above the slot and a message popped up for him to read. *Report to Security Office for Identity Verification*. Who would he meet up there? Would it be anyone he knew?

The records he'd pulled up on the *Marathon* about Parilia didn't tell him whether the Immortals or the Chosen were controlling security these days. The records couldn't know that because the two crime syndicates constantly defeated each other, overthrew each other, drove each other out, and exchanged territories in an unending effort to rule.

The gate boomed once and then scraped across the bare ground as it slid back to admit him. He sauntered into the familiar street and halted there. Multiple alien species scurried through the streets, pushed carts and maneuvered Datrium-powered vehicles, carried huge bundles on their heads and backs, and passed in and out of the buildings on either side.

Eckhart's practiced eye skipped over their clothes, their bundles, and their vehicles. His brain switched back into the old groove of searching everywhere for any resource he could exploit, steal, or turn to his advantage. He spotted at a glance which bundle carried contraband, which vehicle belonged to which merchant, and the social signals each person's clothes sent to everyone around them. He immediately sorted everyone into merchants of various ranks, runners belonging to the crime syndicates, addicts, prostitutes, and street rats scrambling for the slightest crumb dropped by careless beasts of burden.

He wound his way through the city and saw many people he knew, but they didn't recognize him. He'd been gone so long that he'd changed into a completely different person.

In their minds, Adam Eckhart was a half-starved, wary, silent kid sneaking close to the wall to prevent anyone from noticing him. Maybe they thought he would stay that way forever. Maybe they thought he was long dead, like so many others who left Parilia and never came back.

He turned off and climbed a staircase tacked onto the side of a

building. He entered a tiny office at the top where a tall male Urus worked over a computer screen.

Some people thought the Urus were hybrid Earthlings. They were bipedal, upright, and had two forelimbs and two hindlimbs, like Earthlings. Even the Urus' face looked strikingly similar to a human's.

The security chief's smooth skin belied his age. He looked like a fresh-faced teenager, but that couldn't be right, because he'd looked exactly the same when Eckhart last saw him.

He glanced up and frowned before he recognized Eckhart. The guy rose from his seat. He stood at least three inches taller than Eckhart. "I didn't believe it when your name popped up on the feed. Man, you look old!"

Eckhart laughed and held out his hand. "How you doing, Innyria? Are you still haunting this town? When are you going to get a real life?"

Innyria shrugged and waved at the cramped, featureless office. "This is a damn sight better life than most can hope for. I don't mind doing my masters' bidding…and it pays well. I think I might keep it a little longer." He sat down again. "What are you doing back here, Eckhart? I never thought you'd ever come back."

"Neither did I. So who are your masters these days?"

"The Immortals are calling the shots at the moment, but that could change anytime."

"What would you do if it did? You wouldn't be so comfortable then."

Innyria leaned back in his chair and rested his arms on either side. "The Chosen is the only gang that could take over, and I have contacts with them. The Immortals were the ones who installed me in this job. Then they lost to the Chosen, but when it came time for them to reassign their own security chief, I convinced them they would be better off just letting me stay. They gave me a chance to prove I would do the same job for them that I did for the Immortals."

Eckhart chuckled. "Playing both sides of the fence, huh? Smart."

"Don't knock it. It works. Then the Immortals took over again, and since I already had a history with them, they kept me on, too."

"So you've got your corner of the bureaucracy all stitched up." Eckhart went to the door and cast his gaze over the town. "I'm impressed."

Innyria hesitated only a second. “You didn’t tell me what you were doing back here, Eckhart. State your business.”

“No business. I’m just here to see the old neighborhood.”

“Yeah. You keep that bullshit story for your friends in the Regiment. No one comes back to Parilia just to see the old neighborhood. Why are you really here?”

“I really don’t know,” Eckhart admitted. “Maybe some of my old ghosts just won’t stay dead. Maybe I have to come back here to kill them a second time so I can get another twenty years of peace and quiet before I have to do it all over again.”

Innyria snorted. “Peace and quiet? You? Now I know you’re bullshitting me.”

Eckhart turned around and smiled at his old friend. “You know me too well. If you know that, you know I won’t tell you the real reason I’m here.”

“Just tell me one thing,” Innyria went on.

“What is it?”

“Are you still working for Aistenz Trotaer?”

Eckhart looked away. “Not on this job. I’m not here because he ordered me to come, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“So you’re here on a job. I thought so.”

“If you’re finished verifying my identity, I’ll be on my way. I have some people I want to see.”

Innyria stood up. “Just do me a favor, will you? Don’t cause too much damage, or the Immortals might send me after you.”

“I’m not here to do any damage. I just want to talk to a few people.”

Innyria scrutinized him more closely. “What’s the job?”

“I’m here to find out who killed Zels Ariat. I’m working for the Lion Tribe.”

Innyria sank back in his chair and slumped. “Shit!”

“Any ideas who did it?” Eckhart studied his former friend for the slightest hint of a reaction. Innyria could tell him who the other syndicates suspected of the hit, if anyone could.

Innyria waved toward his computer. “Your guess is as good as mine. The Lion Tribe blames Aistenz, and Aistenz blames the Chosen. The Chosen blames the Lion Tribe for whacking their own man to start a gang war with the Chosen. Both groups have a laundry list of operatives who might have been able to carry out the hit—emphasis on *might*.”

“Some people said at the time that whoever carried out the hit would need all the resources of one of the big syndicates to get inside Zels’ protections,” Eckhart suggested.

“Sure. That’s the main reason everyone thinks the hit came from one of the syndicates, but the smart money is on Aistenz Trotaer. He certainly stood to gain from Zels’ death…not that the others didn’t, too.”

“So *you* don’t suspect anybody? No one on any of the syndicates’ payrolls sticks out at you?”

“They all stick out at me. It turns out Zels was supplying enough of the Regiment at the outer limit of their influence with drugs, slaves—you name it. His death affected the Regiment enough that they even investigated it, but they never did anything about it. I don’t think they ever even accused anybody.”

“Is that because they didn’t have the evidence or because they didn’t dare to come to Parilia to look into it?”

“It amounts to the same thing, doesn’t it?”

“I guess so.” Eckhart turned back to the door. “See you around, man.”

He left the security office and headed west toward the poorest slums. He turned the case over in his mind. Innyria hadn’t told him anything he didn’t already know, but hearing it from the sitting security chief on Parilia confirmed several points Eckhart had suspected all along.

So the smart money had made it as far as pinning the hit on Aistenz Trotaer. Fortunately, no one knew Eckhart was working for Aistenz, because the Zels Ariat hit had been Eckhart’s first job for Aistenz. It was his only job for Aistenz until just a few days ago.

He plunged into the slum, passing aliens starving in the gutter, children picking their penniless neighbors’ pockets, parents beating their children in the middle of the street, addicts fighting over rotten scraps of food, and other addicts sleeping off their drug stupors under piles of trash. No merchants or prostitutes ventured here. No carts or vehicles or bundles of goods ever made it this far.

None of these sights penetrated Eckhart’s tough exterior. He might have fooled himself that he didn’t have that exterior anymore. He’d certainly showed some compassion when he took Clifton and DeWalt on board the *Marathon*…and that was saying nothing about Dallas, Alice, and Bing.

He really must be a different person, but that hard shell of

indifference snapped back around him the instant he set foot in this town. He didn't look sideways at all this suffering. He'd seen too much of it, and endured most of it himself.

He turned into a doorway with no door, stepping into a dingy room of bare stone. The windowless gaps in the front wall gave the only light.

He crossed to the very back corner and squatted down in front of what looked like a pile of rags. The shriveled head of an ancient Vono stuck out of the top. Wrinkled eyelids covered the small eyeballs that protruded from the drooping, perfectly spherical head. The creature clutched its tattered rags around it with skeletal, fleshless fingers that didn't relax even in sleep.

Eckhart studied the face for a moment and then took down his backpack. He opened it and dug out a paper packet of dried black leaves.

He separated the lower folds of the rags and took a tiny iron pot and a metal cylinder from the creature's lap. He set up the cylinder on the floor in front of the creature, poured in a measure of liquefied Octratine, lighted it with a striker from his pack, and set the pot on top.

The Vono stirred, wrinkled its nose, and blinked open its eyes. Its gaze moved back and forth without seeing anything. "Who's there?" it croaked. "Is someone there?"

"It's only me," Eckhart murmured. "It's Adam."

The creature cocked its head, but it still didn't look at him. Its blind eyes moved back and forth and the creature rotated its ears from one side to the other, listening. "Adam? Is anything wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong, Dichi. I brought you some tea."

He poured water into the pot, and it sizzled as it started to boil. He crumbled the leaves in and put the lid on the pot.

"Tea!" the creature exclaimed. "Did you do something to buy me tea? How many times do I have to tell you? I don't want you getting into trouble to bring me things."

"I didn't get in trouble. Anyway, I like bringing you things."

The creature shook its head, still staring straight ahead. "You're too kind to me. You're the only one who comes to see me."

"I like coming to see you." Eckhart sat back and rested his elbows on his knees. Something in this ancient creature's pathetic aspect spoke to his forgotten feelings, but the poverty and hopeless wreck of its life still didn't break through to affect him. Nothing

could.

"Krok came around looking for you," the creature told him. "He said you were involved in some robbery. He says he wants you to come in for questioning. I told him I didn't know where you were. I *didn't* know where you were, so it wasn't a lie."

Eckhart smiled at the creature, and a well of sadness overflowed his heart. This ancient creature didn't even remember that Eckhart had left it alone for more than twenty years. The creature wasn't aware that any time had passed.

Krok had been the security chief when Eckhart was young, before he got killed in an Immortals-organized hit on the security office. Krok had been dead for decades, but this creature didn't remember that. The little thing lived in a void where one day blended into the next with no variation.

The creature turned its head to aim its nearer ear toward Eckhart. "You'll go see him, won't you? I don't want you to get in any trouble."

"I'll go see him. Give me your cup."

The creature fished under its ragged blankets and brought out a small iron cup. It handed the cup to Eckhart with its bony fingers. "I'm glad you weren't involved in the robbery. I don't like to think that the food and tea and blankets you bring me came from anything that could get you in trouble."

"Don't worry," Eckhart replied. "I wasn't involved in the robbery."

He wouldn't tell this creature that he *was* involved in the robbery Krok wanted to question him about. Eckhart had been caught, and had served four weeks in a fetid pit cell under the Immortals' headquarters with no small measure of beatings, torture, and threats of death thrown in for good measure.

The creature didn't remember that, either. It had never realized Eckhart was gone. When Eckhart returned to bring the creature food and medicine, it accepted his return as easily as if Eckhart had only been gone a few days.

Eckhart poured the brewed tea into the cup and pressed it into the creature's hand. The creature brought the steamy cup to its lips and took a sip. "Oooo! That's very good tea!"

"I'm glad you like it. There's plenty more in the pot." Eckhart put his water bottle and the striker back in his pack and sealed it. He pressed the packet of tea into the creature's other hand. "Here's

the rest of the tea. Enjoy it. I better go see what Krok wants."

"Yes, you'd better. He was very angry that I couldn't tell him where you were."

"Don't worry. He won't bother you again." Eckhart stood up, slung his pack over his shoulder, and cast one last fond look at the creature. "Goodbye, Dichi."

"You'll come back and see me again, won't you?" the creature croaked. "I always enjoy your visits."

"I enjoy them, too. I'll come see you as soon as I can. See you later."

He bent over and kissed the creature on top of its wrinkled round head. Dichi giggled and squirmed in its blankets. Eckhart could almost imagine the creature blushing as he walked out of the hovel.

In a second, he was back on the street walking away. Dichi would stay there, wrapped in rags, for the rest of eternity, maybe. The creature hadn't aged a day since Eckhart had left.

The moment Eckhart left, he put Dichi out of his mind. The sentimental parts of his visit were over. Now he had to get down to business.

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12

Eckhart halted outside a plain stone building in a different part of Olratha. The usual merchants passed in the street outside. The building itself and its location didn't set it apart from every other structure in Olratha.

The aliens milling around outside gave it away, though. They called out to everyone who passed, offering everything from weapons and drugs for sale to slaves and ships.

Eckhart surveyed the place for a long time. How long did he have to spend on Parilia before he established that he really was investigating Zels' murder? How many of these seedy establishments did he have to frequent before he could leave Parilia and tell Vroltox that he didn't find anything?

While he stood there pondering his fate, a large Bigawa approached from his right. It lumbered down the street, and all the runners, hustlers, and hawkers on the sidewalk surrounded the monster, talking fast.

The Bigawa halted there, listening to them with its brow furrowed. Eckhart didn't have to hear what they were talking about to know exactly what they were telling him.

The Bigawa went inside, and the hustlers all went back to what they were doing before. That was Eckhart's cue.

He crossed the street. None of the hustlers recognized him. They offered to sell him anything he wanted, but he waved them away and ducked under the low doorsill.

He entered another dim room, this one mobbed with dozens of aliens. Acrid smoke hovered throughout the room, and servants wove through the crowd, serving drinks and taking orders.

The Bigawa Eckhart had seen outside towered over the rest near the back wall. He was deep in conversation with another dozen aliens, who bombarded him with comments and reports as fast as they could talk.

The Bigawa listened with that same frown on his ugly face. He didn't say a word, but took in all their information as fast as they could shoot it at him.

Eckhart pushed into the crowd and made his way over to the

group. He waited outside the circle, but the conversation didn't let up.

"Nigonides sent over fourteen tons of Kalcite, but he still hasn't paid for the shipment," one of the runners was saying. "Huria and Pavillon say he's already behind on payments, and the Strillion group put out a hit on him if he doesn't pay up by the end of the week."

"The Dorix Marauders are moving twenty battalions to the Abix Plains," another runner began as soon as the first one stopped talking. "They have forty-five long-range batteries, seventy-five tactical artillery launching stations, and four thousand troops per battalion. Surilia just announced this morning that he's committing another fifty battalions to support the campaign."

"Ankone won the district elections on Ravnus last night," a third one chimed in. "The opposition is already organizing an assault on the capital to depose him. Ten different districts are amassing on the borders to invade during his swearing-in ceremony."

The Bigawa glanced to the fourth runner and spotted Eckhart. The monster waved his arm, and the runners surrounding him fell silent instantly. "That's enough," the giant boomed. "Come back here at sundown for your evening report."

The group scattered instantly, and Eckhart inched forward. The Bigawa's head nearly touched the ceiling. It could flatten him with one blow of its mighty fist if it wanted to.

"You're doing well, Gov," Eckhart began.

"What do you want?" Gov boomed. "I don't stand having my briefings interrupted."

"I'm here on behalf of the Lion Tribe," Eckhart replied. "I'm investigating Zels Ariat's murder so the Lion Tribe can get revenge on the murderer. Do you have any information on that? I'm sure the Lion Tribe would pay well for any information leading to the murderer's capture."

Gov scrutinized Eckhart too closely. "Do I know you?"

"Nope," Eckhart breezed. "I told you. I'm only here to investigate on the Lion Tribe's behalf."

Gov didn't look away, and his intense stare didn't soften. "I could swear I know you. Not many Earthlings come out this far. I usually remember every Earthling I've ever met."

Eckhart forced himself to hold the huge alien's gaze. He even smiled at Gov. "Have you met very many Earthlings?"

Gov broke eye contact and scanned the establishment. It wasn't so much a watering hole as a market for contraband and other goods. "Not many."

"What about it, Gov?" Eckhart persisted. "Do you have any information about Zels' death? I figured if anyone knows anything, it would be you."

Gov snapped around and studied Eckhart with another drilling stare. "How do you know that?"

Eckhart shrugged. He might have just tipped his hand. "Just what I heard."

"Not many people off of Parilia know I deal in information. You must be from here."

"Actually, Innyria told me," Eckhart lied. "He mentioned that you might be able to give me some information. He speaks very highly of you."

"Innyria is a spineless Teclite who doesn't know his asshole from his mouth," Gov hissed.

Eckhart burst out laughing. "You're right. I think he might be permanently glued to his chair."

"It turns out that I do have information on Zels Ariat's murder," Gov replied.

Eckhart's stomach lurched. Was it good news or bad? How much did Gov know? Gov knew everything. If he'd gleaned even the tiniest scrap of evidence about who really killed Zels, Eckhart had to know. It could be a matter of life and death for Eckhart himself.

"I heard," Gov went on, "that one of the Chosen's contractors hired fourteen mercenary operatives off the planet and brought them here to hit Zels. They worked out of a hotel room uptown where they organized the hit. The hotel owner would be able to tell us more about who they were."

"Are you sure the owner remembers them? It was a long time ago, and every hotel in this town must see a lot of that kind of activity."

"He remembers."

"How do you know?"

"Because I already spoke to him about it."

"Did he tell you who the hitman was?"

"He didn't tell me, but he might tell *you*. The Lion Tribe's money can loosen a lot of tongues that I can't."

"Which hotel is it?" Eckhart asked.

“I’ll take you there. I have some history with the owner. He’s more likely to talk if I introduce you.”

Gov plowed his way out of the establishment. He knocked over quite a few people who got in his way, but no one dared to complain.

He carved a path for Eckhart to follow him. Eckhart fell in step behind Gov on the street outside. He didn’t really want to go uptown to speak to any hotel owner about some mythical hitman and his nonexistent band of off-planet mercenary operatives.

No hitman ever organized Zels’ hit in any upstairs hotel room, but Eckhart had to go along with this, now that he’d spun Gov his tale of investigating the murder.

Gov trooped through town at a steady pace, but his many runners, hustlers, and informants slowed him down considerably. Gov halted on nearly every corner to take reports from his people about events happening all over Parilia, and even on other worlds. Somehow he kept track of it all in that brain of his.

He finally entered the wealthy part of town. The highest officers of several crime syndicates resided in mansions here, and most of the syndicates kept their headquarters here.

Needless to say, the wealth attracted the poor to steal anything they could sell to exchange for food. Eckhart spotted squads of security goons beating and capturing several hollow-eyed intruders and trucking them off to somewhere Eckhart didn’t want to think about. That was life in Olratha. It was a reality Eckhart knew only too well.

Gov finally entered a fancy hotel consisting of four enormous white marble towers situated close to each other. Their Ioscesten windows looked out over Olratha from so high up that no one inside could see or have to care about everything going on down on the ground.

Gov approached the reception desk and then vanished into the manager’s office. The reception concierges studied Eckhart for a moment and then went back to what they were doing.

Gov came back and waved Eckhart forward. “Follow me. He’s going to meet us upstairs where we can talk in private.”

Eckhart accompanied him to an elevator that carried them high up into the main tower. They exited in a giant penthouse apartment with a large balcony overlooking most of Olratha. The town didn’t look anywhere near as seedy or decrepit from up here. In fact, it

looked positively picturesque.

Gov went over to the balcony, slid back the Ioscesten double doors, and stepped out into the baking sunshine. A cooling breeze softened some of the heat.

"Where's the owner?" Eckhart asked. "What's taking so long?"

"He'll be here soon. He's a very busy man."

Gov turned to look out at the view. With nothing better to do, Eckhart followed Gov's gaze out toward the Outer Ring…and his stomach dropped when he spotted the *Marathon* parked out there.

Dallas and Bing worked on the ship's outer hull. The sun gleamed on Dallas's armor.

Eckhart knew he was doomed an instant before it happened. He shot out a hand to the *Marathon*. Words choked in his throat. He wanted to call out a warning to his friends, but they wouldn't be able to hear him from here.

Two roofs cracked open on either side of the main entrance gate. They levered back, and matched plasma cannons rose into the air. They stabbed the air and lifted above the wall to take aim at the *Marathon*.

"No!" Eckhart roared, but it was too late.

Both cannons opened up and blasted into the ship's hull, but the Celdian shielding flickered on the second before the shots hit the ship. Good old Alice…or was it Rixby?

Thank the stars someone on board was paying attention, because the plasma cracked across the shield as countless shots pounded the hull.

Dallas and Bing raced for the hatch, already closing as the engines fired to life. The two friends barely reached it in time. Bing dove inside, but Dallas planted himself outside the hatch, turned to face the cannons, and slotted out his assault guns.

He took aim at the two cannons, but before he could fire, the *Marathon*'s guns rotated backward and fired. They smashed one weapon to pieces, but two more roofs flipped open and more cannons rose above the town.

The ship's engines screeched, and Dallas turned tail. He skidded up the ramp as the ship rocketed into the atmosphere, hounded by streams of plasma.

Gov chuckled low under his breath. "You won't be seeing that ship again for a while."

He turned to face Eckhart, but Eckhart couldn't tear his eyes

away from the spot where the *Marathon* had disappeared. He had walked straight into a trap, and now he was alone on this planet.

He started to turn around to confront his captor when something crashed into the back of his head. He buckled on the spot and blacked out.

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13

Dallas stormed onto the bridge. “What the hell are you doing?”

“What does it look like I’m doing?” Alice snarled at him. “I’m flying this trash can out of here.”

“Turn around!” Dallas practically bellowed. “We have to go back.”

Alice didn’t answer. Her sightless eyes stared into the tactical web with frightening savagery even though there was nothing there. No ships followed the *Marathon* away from Parilia. No one was shooting at the ship anymore.

“Did you hear me?” Dallas stalked another foot closer to her chair. “We’re going back. We aren’t leaving Eckhart behind on that planet.”

Alice still didn’t reply. She completely ignored him. “We can’t go back,” Rixby piped up from on top of her workstation. “We couldn’t get close to Olratha with those cannons shooting at us.”

“No one is shooting at us now. There’s nothing stopping us from going back and landing somewhere else on Parilia.” He turned back to Alice. “Are you listening to me? I’m talking to you.”

She pretended she couldn’t hear him and kept flying straight ahead. Her bony arms wrestled the regulators as hard as if she’d been in the middle of an air battle.

A sudden urge overcame Dallas’s better judgment. He raised one mechanical arm to yank her out of the seat.

Rixby’s voice stopped him. “We can’t go back, Dallas. I’m sorry. I’m as worried about Eckhart as you are, but we couldn’t get anywhere near Parilia now.”

“Why the hell not?”

“Because the crime syndicates control the whole planet. They’re the only law on Parilia. If one shot at us like that with no provocation, it means all the others are onto us, too—or they’re onto Eckhart, anyway. They know about him and they know the *Marathon* is his ship, which means everyone else on the whole planet knows. If we tried to land at another city, they’d only shoot at us again.”

He turned away from Alice to face Rixby, but when he started to

argue, he stopped himself. Her logic started to penetrate the fog of panic that had gripped him when the *Marathon* fled from Parilia.

"We have to find another way to get back to Parilia," she told him, "but it won't be in the *Marathon*."

"How do you figure?" he asked. "This is the only ship we have."

"First, we have to find a place to hide." Rixby bent over her workstation. "Head for Drath. There's a Regiment station there. We can hide—"

"What?! No!" Dallas interrupted. "We can't hide at a Regiment station! Are you insane?"

"It's the only place the crime syndicates won't look for us. The Immortals and the Chosen control Parilia, and if the Lion Tribe captured Eckhart, they'll be on Parilia, too. All three will be looking for us."

Dallas checked himself. "Chanus!"

"What about it?" Alice snarled through her mask.

"The three syndicates that chased us away from Chanus K4. Eckhart wondered why so many of them came after us. We assumed it had something to do with DeWalt, but maybe it was this."

"They were different syndicates, but it doesn't matter," Rixby went on. "We need a place to hide where the syndicates won't find us. We won't do anything to attract the Regiment's attention, but we have to hide the *Marathon* before someone finds out where we are."

Dallas fell silent, but his chest hurt watching Alice fly farther and farther away from Parilia. Every second took them farther away from Eckhart.

After a wait that lasted way too long, she dropped into orbit over a planet several systems away from Parilia. No ships followed them. No one tracked them. No one knew where they were…or so Dallas hoped.

Alice practically threw the regulators away and stalked off the bridge. Rixby hopped off her workstation and ambled over to Dallas.

"Don't worry, Dallas," she squeaked. "The Lion Tribe won't kill Eckhart. They'll keep him alive for a long time. There's no hurry."

"That's just wonderful, Rixby," he snapped. "That's precisely what I want to hear."

She waggled her antennae, examining him. "Eckhart means as much to the rest of us as he does to you. None of us wants to

abandon him."

"What are we doing standing around talking, then?" Dallas demanded. "We should get back there and help him. The Lion Tribe won't have anything nice planned for him."

"I'm sure they don't, but Eckhart is resilient. He grew up in Olratha, so he knows everyone in town. We can trust him to handle whatever they throw at him until we find him."

Dallas scanned Rixby through his helmet. His scanners showed him that all her vital signs were well within their normal ranges. She was perfectly calm and not anxious or nervous at all, which pissed Dallas off more than ever.

She should be petrified about losing Eckhart. She should be as fearful as Dallas was about getting Eckhart back. "We don't even know if he's still on Parilia. They could have taken him anywhere."

"I doubt they *plan* to take him anywhere," she replied with maddening assurance. "They want to pay him back for a crime he committed on Parilia. I don't see them taking him anywhere."

He snorted. "So what's your grand plan?"

She waited way too long before she answered. "Come downstairs. We need to talk to Bing and Alice about this."

She sauntered off the bridge and left him fuming. What could Alice, Bing, and Rixby do to get Eckhart away from the Lion Tribe? None of them was strong enough. Not all of them together were strong enough to take on the Lion Tribe.

Dallas wanted to storm Olratha and lay waste to everyone and everything that got in his path. That was the only thing the crime syndicates understood, and he was the only person on the *Marathon* equipped to do that.

Every delay was another nail in Eckhart's coffin. Dallas knew what he had to do, but he needed the others to do it. He needed a ship, and he needed someone to fly it.

He stomped down to the galley to find the other three sitting around doing jack shit. Bing actually had the gall to be eating at a time like this, and worse, he was joking around as usual.

"Here's what I say," Bing drawled with his mouth full. "I go into Drath Station and get a job mopping the floors or whatever."

"You could get a better job in the infirmary," Alice interrupted. "The Regiment is always looking for Yakit at fringe stations."

"That won't work," Rixby chimed in. "He'd be too noticeable in the infirmary. They would notice him missing. He'd do better

mopping the floors."

"What the hell are you three talking about?" Dallas interjected. "Do any of you realize how serious the situation is?"

"That's what we're talking about," Bing replied. "We're talking about stealing a ship from the Regiment."

"You're out of your tree if you think you could get a ship away from a Regiment station," Alice growled. "We might as well kill ourselves now. It would be less painful."

"We don't have to steal a ship," Rixby interrupted. "We only need to get back to Parilia without anyone seeing the *Marathon*."

"What about using one of our façades?" Dallas asked. "We've used them a thousand times before."

"We can't," Rixby replied. "The syndicates have tracking technology for seeing through façades."

"How can the syndicates have this technology but the Regiment doesn't?" Dallas demanded.

"None of this explains how we're going to get a ship," Alice cut in.

"I told you," Rixby replied. "We don't need a ship. We only need to get back to Parilia."

"What's the difference?" Bing asked. "It isn't like we can flap our wings and fly back there without a ship."

"We don't need a ship," Rixby repeated. "We can book passage on another ship—a ship none of the syndicates will see as suspicious."

The other three turned around to stare at her. "How do you plan to do that?" Dallas asked.

"The syndicates have contracts with the Regiment. The Chosen, the Immortals, and the Lion Tribe all traffic contraband to Regiment stations. They come and go from Drath all the time. All we have to do is pay them off to take us back to Parilia. Then the syndicates won't notice when one of their own vessels lands on the planet."

"How do we pay for it?" Bing asked. "Last I checked, booking passage on a syndicate vessel costs money, and we don't have any. Eckhart took his money with him when he went into Olratha."

"No, he didn't. He had fifty chips from Vroltox, and he left them all on board. He would have been stupid to take them into Olratha. The place is crawling with pickpockets."

"How do you know he left them on board?" Dallas asked. "Did he tell you?"

“He didn’t tell me. He hid them from all of us in his quarters.”

“So how do you know if he didn’t tell you?”

“Because the ship’s internal scanners picked up their hiding place.”

“So you want to rob Eckhart of his money?” Dallas snapped. “Now I’ve heard everything.”

“Using Eckhart’s money to free him from the Lion Tribe isn’t stealing,” Bing replied in such a gentle undertone that Dallas couldn’t stay mad at him anymore. “I think it’s a safe bet that Eckhart would want us to use his money to help him.”

“You’re low on nutrient, Dallas,” Rixby chirped. “You need to fill up.”

He spun around to stare at her. “Huh?”

“Your blood sugar is low. You need to take on nutrient.” She waddled over to the nutrient aperture set into the wall.

A single flicker of his internal sensors told him she was right. He resented her for pointing it out. He didn’t want to stop being angry about the Lion Tribe capturing Eckhart, but he trooped over there and attached his port to the aperture anyway.

Fortunately, filling up on nutrient didn’t make him less angry about it, or less agitated about getting Eckhart back. “So how do we find him once we get back to Parilia?”

“We can’t all go,” Rixby replied, “especially not you, Dallas. You’ll have to stay behind. You can guard the *Marathon*.”

“Forget it!” he bellowed. “I’m *not* staying behind. Don’t even suggest it.”

“You have to,” Rixby told him. “You’re too noticeable. You’d attract too much attention. Whoever goes after Eckhart has to be able to move through town without anyone taking any particular notice.”

“Who’s gonna do that? I suppose you think Bing and Alice will attract less attention. Well, they won’t. There aren’t any Yakit or Bion on Parilia. They’ll stick out a mile.”

“I wasn’t going to suggest them,” Rixby replied.

“Who else is there? The only other people on board are tied up in a semi-solid mass in the Crick centrifuge.”

“I’ll go.”

Dallas had to check his hearing sensors once before he believed that those words actually came from Rixby herself. He stared down at her in disbelief. “You! You wouldn’t last ten seconds on Parilia.”

“You aren’t the only one who wants to blast our way into town with guns blazing,” Alice hissed through her mask. “I’d like nothing better than to bombard Olratha from the air and devastate every building in town, but that won’t get Eckhart back.”

Dallas looked back and forth between her and Rixby. Why should he be so surprised that Alice would want to slaughter anyone who dared to lay a finger on Eckhart? Dallas knew the story about how Eckhart had saved Alice from the Black Platoon.

Why shouldn’t Alice be as concerned for Eckhart’s safety? Why shouldn’t they all be as interested in getting Eckhart back in one piece?

“I can find out where Eckhart is more easily than any of you,” Rixby went on. “I don’t need weapons or money for that.”

“How are you going to get him out once you find him?” Bing asked. “How do you plan to take on the whole Lion Tribe without guns?”

“That’s up to me. Dallas, you’ll stay here with the *Marathon*… and Alice, I think you should stay, too. Once I find Eckhart, we’ll need you to fly the ship in and pick us up.”

“What about me?” Bing asked. “Do you want me to come along and patch you up after the Lion Tribe cuts you to ribbons?”

“You can’t come. Like Dallas pointed out, a Yakit on Parilia would stick out too much. I want you to book passage on the freighter with me as an independent passenger. Whatever syndicate is running it will take you into their infirmary. You can wait for me there until I bring Eckhart to you.”

“How will you signal us when you want us to pick you up?” Dallas asked.

“That will be up to me, too.”

“So we just have to sit around and wait for your call?” Dallas humphed again. “Great.”

“That’s right. Now, if we’re all agreed, we’d better get to work. I checked the station records before we left the bridge. An Immortals slave barge is leaving Drath in half an hour. Finish your lunch, Bing, and let’s go.”

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14

A hard slap across the face woke Eckhart from black unconsciousness. He jolted upright and found himself tied to a chair.

He looked around fast, trying to gauge where he was, but he couldn't see anything beyond the glare of a lightbulb over his head.

He twisted against his bonds and tried to concentrate. He could only be here for one reason. The Lion Tribe had set him up. Vroltox had known all along that he was the one who'd killed Zels Ariat. Vroltox must have sent Eckhart back to Parilia intending for the Lion Tribe to capture him.

Adrenaline scorched Eckhart's insides when he thought about what the Lion Tribe would do to him to get their revenge, but a second later, he forced himself to calm down. He knew when he took this job that it would probably end like this. He just didn't think it would happen so soon.

A muffled growl startled him upright again. He squinted through the glare at a looming outline of a large pile of something black beyond the ring of light. It groaned under its breath, easing close to him.

Out of nowhere, a long, muscular tentacle cracked through the air and smacked him hard across the face. It would have toppled any normal chair, but this one must be bolted to the floor.

Eckhart whipped sideways with a gasp of pain, but he willed himself to stay calm. This was nothing. This was just an introduction to what the Lion Tribe had in store for him.

The tentacle slithered back in his direction, but this time, it drooped over his chest and shoulder. It glided down his stomach to his legs and wound back up to encircle his body.

Without warning, an electric charge shot through him. The tentacle cinched tight around his torso as a scorching jolt of electricity gripped every muscle.

He jerked and convulsed against the shock. His teeth locked and his muscles threatened to break him in half.

The charge cut out just as quickly and he flopped against his restraints, panting hard. Pain wracked his body and he retched on

the floor. This thing hiding in the shadows wasn't his captor. Whatever it was, the Lion Tribe had put it in here to exact their revenge.

Whoever did this must be nearby. They must be watching. They would want to savor their vengeance in person.

Gov had nothing to do with this. He wasn't even a member of any syndicate. He was just doing a job when he led Eckhart into the Lion Tribe's carefully constructed snare.

"Show yourself!" Eckhart bellowed. "I know you're there! Who are you?"

A deep, throaty voice chuckled from the shadows. "Welcome home, Eckhart. I knew you'd come back. You stayed away for so long that I knew you never planned to set foot on Parilia again, so I had to use the only lure I knew would bring you back for good."

Eckhart's head shot up. His eyes hurt straining to see beyond the shadows. All his forced calm evaporated when he heard that voice. "Vora!" He couldn't say the name above a whisper.

A low, chesty chuckle rumbled through the darkness. "Eckhart," she boomed. "Good old Eckhart."

The tentacled monster struck him hard again, this time across the chest. Razor barbs on its limbs slashed through his shirt and sliced into his skin. Blood oozed from the wound, and Eckhart gasped in pain.

Some mysterious substance stung the open cut worse than just a blade. Some kind of poison leaked into his flesh and made the wound sear in agony.

He gritted his teeth and winced, trying everything possible to fight down panic. The Lion Tribe had captured him, but they'd never wanted to get revenge for Zels Ariat's murder. They were bringing him to Vora all the time.

"I'm going to have a lot of fun with you, Eckhart," she growled. "I've been waiting a long time to get my hands on you, and now nothing will stop me from enjoying myself as much as I want."

The tentacle looped around Eckhart's body again, and this time, the barbs cut in a slow, torturous passage that crossed the first wound.

Four more tentacles appeared out of the dark. They wrapped around him, winding around his limbs and body, each one slicing into him in a thousand ways and in a thousand directions.

Each one burned beyond endurance, and he screamed out in

pain as those excruciating cuts kept expanding until they covered every inch of him.

He heard Vora laughing through his screams. His mind exploded and he flung himself full force against his restraints, but he couldn't get away from this horror.

The creature let him go and he collapsed. He couldn't hold himself up, and his chin fell on his chest. He shut his eyes, clutching at every breath of life left to him. This was so much worse than getting captured by the Lion Tribe.

He could understand the Lion Tribe torturing him to get revenge, but Vora didn't want revenge. She wanted something much, much worse. She wanted to keep him for herself.

He commanded himself to think. He had to get out of here, but the *Marathon* and its crew were light years away. They might try to find him, but they'd look in all the wrong places. They'd look at the Lion Tribe while Vora got away with him.

Once he left this planet, the *Marathon* crew would never find him. He had to escape before then, but Vora wouldn't relax her vigilance for a second. She would be a thousand times more watchful than the Lion Tribe.

Her deep, rumbling voice penetrated his turmoil. "Bring him."

The creature moved in once again, but it didn't hit or cut or shock him. It fiddled with his restraints and he flopped out of the chair. He couldn't hold himself up.

The creature's limbs slithered through his blood, holding him up. It dragged his rubbery legs across the floor, through the dark, and into a plain corridor.

Eckhart's vision swam in and out of focus. He tried to keep track of where he was going. The corridor ended in a brilliant explosion of sunshine that blinded him for a second.

His heart dropped into his boots when he saw that the creature was hauling him across the Outer Ring toward a ship parked outside Olratha.

Eckhart tried to get his legs under him, but they wouldn't support him. The creature's appendages grappled around his bloody carcass too tightly, and he lacked any strength even to struggle anymore.

He could only blink in horror as the creature carried him through the hatch, through the cargo hold, through more corridors, up and down stairs, to a brightly-lit infirmary.

Eckhart swooned again when the creature lifted him onto one of the exam tables. “Clean him up,” Vora boomed. “I want him fit for service by sunset. I have plans for him.”

Eckhart stared up at the glaring lights shining in his eyes. This was bad. Vora would take him off the planet and he would disappear into the vast flow of slaves, trophies, and contraband crossing the galaxy. She might never take him off this ship.

He distantly registered the creature’s muscular limbs slipping off him. His whole body shrieked in pain and dripped blood from every piece of his skin. What could Vora’s crew possibly do to bring him back from this?

He must have passed out for a second because, when he came back to his senses, he found himself looking up at Bing’s face bending over him. The lights behind Bing’s head blazed into Eckhart’s eyes.

He sighed in blessed relief. He was back on the *Marathon*. He was safe. Bing was here. Bing would save him.

“When are you gonna learn your lesson and stay away from my Canker Nuggets?” Bing murmured. “I told you there would be serious consequences if you didn’t stop raiding my stash. When are you gonna listen to me?”

Eckhart burst out laughing. Laughing made him hurt even worse, but he was too glad to see Bing to hold back. Only Bing could make him laugh at a time like this. “You’re right, pal,” Eckhart choked on the verge of total breakdown. “I’m a clod. I’ll make you a deal. I’ll give you five Golden Trident bars to make up for it.”

Bing chuckled, but he didn’t laugh out loud. “I’m gonna hold you to that.”

Eckhart’s eyes drifted open, but when he looked at his friend, he saw Bing glance toward the door.

That one glance brought the awful reality back to Eckhart with a stomach-turning lurch. He wasn’t on the *Marathon*. He was on Parilia, but not for much longer. He was a prisoner on Vora’s ship, and he was not in good shape at all.

“What are you doing here, Bing?” Eckhart whispered. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“Are you kidding? Dallas would have twisted my arms off if I didn’t come. He wanted to bring the *Marathon* to break you out, but fortunately for us all, Rixby talked us out of it.”

“Rixby! Is she here, too?”

“No, she isn’t here.” Bing glanced toward the door again. “Thankfully.”

Bing bent over Eckhart, opened Eckhart’s mouth, and spat a blob of Eplite onto his tongue. He turned to the side and hissed straight into Eckhart’s ear. “Now listen to me, Eckhart. We’re gonna get you out of here, but you have to go along with Vora for now.”

“Are you…?” Eckhart started to protest.

“Just do what I tell you for once in your life!” Bing snapped in a much different tone. “We’re all taking a massive risk to get you away from here, so do your part and keep acting like a prisoner. She’s going to take you off the planet and put you in her stable.”

Eckhart gulped. “I know.”

“You have to struggle. She’s going to try to subdue you, and you have to go along with it. You can’t let on that I’m here. Understand?”

“What do you take me for? You’re one of my closest friends. I wouldn’t sell you out.”

“Just remember what I said. That Onzai that brought you in can be very persuasive. It might get bad enough that you’d let something slip just to get yourself some relief.”

Eckhart didn’t answer. Bing was right. Vora had plenty of excruciating methods to break down her victims. He would have to be extremely careful about what he said, what he did, and what he gave away while he was in Vora’s custody. He couldn’t let Vora know Bing was helping him…and Bing would be helping Eckhart a lot, if Vora had anything to say about it.

Bing gave him another dose of Eplite and then started working on his many gashes and cuts. The pain started to ease as the Eplite took effect, but the Onzai’s poison overrode the Eplite’s healing effects. The process took a long, long time, and Eckhart passed out several times before Bing finished with him.

When he woke up the next time, he immediately felt the ship humming through the table. The ship must be en route. They had already left Parilia.

He looked around for Bing, his last hope. His friend worked over the medical equipment across the infirmary. “Thanks, pal.”

Bing turned around, but he didn’t joke or smile back at Eckhart. “I’m really sorry about this. I wish there was more I could do.”

“What are you talking about? You have no idea how happy I am

to see you."

Bing shrugged, but before he could answer, four enormous Bigawas trooped into the infirmary. Eckhart saw at a glance that they weren't here for medical treatment.

"Get up, slave!" The biggest one stormed over to him and brandished what looked like a cattle prod to make Eckhart get up. "You're going before Vora."

Eckhart sighed and heaved himself off the table. "I'm coming."

The Bigawa seized his arm in a crushing grip anyway and shoved him out of the infirmary. Eckhart tried to look back for one glimpse of his friend, but the Bigawa didn't let him.

The creature jabbed him hard with the prod, and a blistering shock seared through him. Eckhart crumpled with a groan, but the Bigawas picked him up and hauled him away.

A door crashed aside, and the Bigawas shook him into a standing position. High-pitched laughter startled him into raising his head, and he stiffened to high alert when he found himself in a huge room crowded with hundreds of aliens from dozens of different species. They gyrated around to fast-paced dance music, drank and smoked, and generally fraternized without a care in the world, but none of them concerned Eckhart.

A gigantic creature billowing with many folds of fat lounged on a platform across the room. Ten servants waited on this creature, feeding it, fanning it, and patting it with handkerchiefs.

The creature opened its broad mouth, and a great, ground-shaking belch carried through the party. Some of the guests looked up at it, but Eckhart wasn't interested in the monster.

His gaze snapped to a tiny, scruffy bundle of fur perched near the monster's elbow. The creature could have smashed this puffball flat in a second. Two black glints gleamed out of the little alien's furry face when it made eye contact with Eckhart, and he shuddered to his core.

It was Vora.

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15

Rixby bobbed back and forth on her flat feet to cross the Outer Ring. She left the Immortals freighter that had brought her and Bing from Drath, and she approached the big entrance gate to the city of Olratha.

The Bigawa guards grunted at her, but she ignored their snide remarks. She'd checked the town records before she left the *Marathon*. These Bigawas saw plenty of Lemaria, so her presence here shouldn't arouse their curiosity.

In fact, they didn't express any surprise that she wanted to enter. They only teased her about her likely fate in such a dangerous environment.

She had to turn sideways to stick her stubby hand into the identity slot. She wasn't surprised when the text appeared telling her to report to the security office to verify her identity.

She made her way there and struggled up the stairs. Hardly anyone designed cities for Lemaria, but she was used to it by now.

She turned into the office, but the security officer didn't notice her. Her body didn't come up to the top of the desk. Only her antennae stuck up above it.

"Good morning!" she chirped. "I'm here to report my identity."

The Urus behind the desk looked up and frowned toward the door before he noticed her antennae. He had to stand up to see her properly. "Who are you?"

"My name is Gnovonia, but everyone calls me Rixby. The gate identifier told me to report to your office for verification."

The Urus collapsed back in his seat with an exasperated sigh. "Another Lemaria! You can go."

She didn't move. She examined him a little closer. "Your name is Innyria, isn't it?"

His head snapped up a lot faster this time. "How do you know that?"

"It's in the Chulvai system records. You're listed as the security officer for this town."

He scowled at her. "What if I am?"

"You work for the Immortals—at least, you do now. You work

for the Chosen when they take power in Olratha."

"So what? A lot of people change their allegiances to stay alive on Parilia."

"Did you sell Eckhart to the Lion Tribe?"

He froze. "What did you say?"

"I'm looking for Adam Eckhart. The most recent records from this security office state that he checked in with you for verification when he first came to town."

"Yeah. He did. That doesn't mean—"

"I'm asking if you handed him to the Lion Tribe. If you belong to whoever is in charge…"

"I didn't hand Eckhart to anyone. Now get the hell out of my office before I—"

"You knew Eckhart a long time ago, Innyria," she went on. "You did a robbery with him when you were both a lot younger."

She gauged his reaction down to the micron. He broke eye contact with her and turned back to his computer. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Krok was security officer then. He suspected you and Eckhart of belonging to a gang of young slum rats who robbed a house on the hill north of town. You broke in and stole four kilos of Eglalt out of a safe belonging to Koqiex Sholtu."

Innyria shivered and snarled through gritted teeth. "Get out of my office!"

"Tell me where Eckhart is, Innyria. I won't ask again."

His mouth sagged open, but he ended up drawing a ragged breath instead of speaking.

"My friends and I will be passing Cibrion after this," Rixby breezed. "It would be a real shame if we happened to mention to the Jackal Clan that we knew who stole that Eglalt from Koqiex."

"Vora," Innyria husked. "Vora took him."

Rixby blinked at him, and then she wilted. "Damn."

"She captured him in a hotel and held him in a basement, but she took him onto her ship…it's called the *Sophros*. You can find it in the records. They left a few hours ago. I don't know where she took him."

Rixby thought fast. The *Sophros*…that was the freighter she and Bing had taken to return to Parilia. It belonged to the Immortals, who conveniently didn't register a list of their passengers.

Rixby kicked herself for not checking first. She shouldn't have

made a mistake like that. Now Eckhart was on that ship, heading away from Parilia.

At least Bing was on board with him. That was some small mercy. Bing could keep Eckhart alive until the *Marathon* found him.

She shook it off. “Never mind. I know where she took him.”

“You… you know Vora?”

“Of course. We know her very well. Don’t worry. We’ll find Eckhart. Thank you for your help, Innyria.”

She started to leave, and Innyria rocketed to his feet. “Wait!”

She hesitated and examined him. “Yes?”

“What does she have on him? Why does she hate him so much?”

“Vora? She doesn’t hate Eckhart. She’s in love with him. We did a job for her years ago. She wanted him to stick around and become her lover. She got bitter and spiteful when he refused, and she’s been scheming about a way to get him back ever since.” Rixby turned away. “You have a nice morning, Innyria.”

“Wait!”

Rixby turned back a second time, but she wanted to cut this short. She had to rendezvous with the *Marathon* quickly, and that meant getting the ship back to Parilia.

Innyria folded forward and rested his hands on his desk while he took several deep, steadying breaths.

“What is it, Innyria?” she asked. “I need to leave. We don’t have much time to find Eckhart before Vora does something drastic.”

Innyria straightened up. His smooth face appeared to have aged in a few minutes. He looked drawn and old all of a sudden. “I’m coming with you.”

“Why? You have a job here.”

Innyria shook his head. “I owe Eckhart. He covered for me when we were younger. He took the rap on that robbery so I escaped the punishment.”

“If you knew Vora took him, why didn’t you help him before?”

“I couldn’t do anything against Vora by myself. Besides, the Lion Tribe would go after me if I did it here. But if you have a crew, I’m coming with you.”

Rixby didn’t tell him what she thought of that plan. She didn’t like the *Marathon* crew’s chances of taking out Vora’s guards at the best of times. This Urus wouldn’t tip the scales in their favor, but she didn’t have time to argue about it now.

“Do you have a ship?” she asked.

“Yeah. It’s this way.”

He led the way to a different stairway leading to the security office roof. A miniature Volt runabout perched on top of the building. It was barely big enough for both of them to squeeze inside.

Rixby took the seat behind the pilot’s station while Innyria fired up the engines. “Where will Vora take Eckhart?” he asked through the communications channel.

“I’m programming your navigation system now.” She went to work on the controls.

“This course leads to Drath Station!” he cried. “The Regiment has nothing to do with this.”

“We have to get within communications range of the *Marathon*. We’ll have to rendezvous with the ship at Zieliv.”

He wheeled around in his seat and his eyes nearly fell out of their sockets. “Zieliv! We can’t go there.”

“Do you want to help Eckhart or not, ‘cuz that’s where we’re going.”

He faced forward and concentrated on steering the Volt out of the atmosphere. He used his clearance with the Immortals to avoid any of the incoming vessels from getting suspicious about him leaving his post.

In a second, they streaked into the black stars and Rixby sent her message to the *Marathon*. She corrected the Volt’s course for Zieliv, and she detected Innyria slowing the Volt’s speed as they approached the planet. “I’m setting up an orbit to wait for your *Marathon*.”

“No!” Rixby ordered. “Land at the coordinates I’m sending you.”

“These coordinates are reading as a military installation!” Innyria gasped. “It’s bigger than a Regiment station.”

“Yeah.” Rixby scanned the charts on her controls. “There’s a warehouse over there. Head for that and park inside.”

“Inside!” Innyria exclaimed. “Vora’s security will stop us.”

“I hope so.”

The Volt’s internal scanners showed her Innyria’s adrenal response spiking off the charts. If he didn’t calm down really quickly, Rixby would have to leave him behind. He would only become a liability at this rate.

He steered the Volt toward the warehouse. The big doors stood open with a few other small craft parked inside, but no security

patrolled the place.

"What is this?" Innyria asked.

"It's a repair shed. All the craft in here are under construction or in for long-term repair. Park in that spot over there."

Innyria hunched his shoulders and didn't respond. He set the Volt down where she told him to. Mechanics surrounded the Volt when he popped the cockpit cover.

He and Rixby climbed down to the ground, and the Imae mechanics accosted the new arrivals with questions about the Volt. "What are they saying?" Innyria whispered.

Rixby responded to the mechanics in their own language. The mechanics all nodded and attacked the Volt with energy.

Innyria paled again. "What did you tell them? What are they doing with my ship?"

"I told them to strip down the electrical system. I told them it's been malfunctioning and scrambling navigation charts en route. I told them the Volt is useless until it gets fixed."

"What the hell!" he hissed. "What are we supposed to fly to get the hell off this rock?"

"The *Marathon* will take us."

Innyria pretended to look around. "What *Marathon*? It isn't even here."

"Never mind about that. We're going to get Eckhart."

She started to walk away, but he remained rooted to the spot. "Maybe… maybe you should stay here," he suggested. "You might get underfoot if we encounter resistance."

"We *will* encounter resistance, but I'm still going."

He didn't move. "Are you sure that's wise? You could get hurt… or worse."

She inclined her head to one side and waved her antennae at him. "How do you plan to find Eckhart without me?'

He gulped. "Okay. Good point."

She started waddling across the base. It really was bigger than a Regiment station, but that didn't bother her. She'd memorized charts of the base the first time the *Marathon* crew dealt with Vora, and Rixby never forgot anything.

Innyria hurried after her, glancing left and right and behind him. "This is a really bad idea. I came along because I thought you had other people to help you."

"I do."

“So where are they? You’ll excuse me if I don’t share your faith that they’ll turn up at the right time.”

“They will.”

“How do you know? Maybe something went wrong. Maybe they didn’t get your message. Maybe they thought twice about attacking Vora’s base with only… You didn’t tell me how many people you brought with you.”

Rixby didn’t answer. He wouldn’t understand about the *Marathon* crew. If she told him about Dallas and Alice, Innyria would freak that only two other people were coming, even if one of those people was a mechanized cyborg like Dallas.

She entered a long, domed building full of offices, and she padded down the long corridor between hundreds of doors. Security Bigawas stood stationed outside each one, but they didn’t look sideways at Rixby.

Innyria’s jittery attitude did spark the Bigawas’ attention, though, especially when he moved his hand to his sidearm.

Rixby didn’t correct him. By the time they got halfway down the building, most of the Bigawas were scowling at Innyria. She had to do something before the situation blew up in their faces.

She opened another door at the far end and descended a long ramp to the base’s lower levels. She approached another door at the far end, and she didn’t stop to give Innyria any explanation. The sooner Innyria stopped worrying about the inevitable, the better for both of them.

She marched through and walked right into a squad of Shaslat assassins waiting on the other side.

The Shaslat all stared at Rixby when she toddled through the door. They didn’t react until Innyria appeared, and then the assassins all struck at once.

They rocketed at him in a howling swarm. He barely had time to pull his sidearm. He fired once and hit a single Shaslat before all the others hit him at once.

They collided with Innyria and plastered him to the door through which he’d just passed. Their many limbs rotated in a whirlwind, pummeling him and wrapping around his neck.

They started to drag him to the ground when a blistering torch of plasma ricocheted down the corridor behind where the Shaslat had been stationed.

Rixby ducked and rolled out of the way as Alice stormed into

view, armed with a giant pounder. She unloaded on the Shaslat with such a devastating volley that she blasted the door off its hinges.

The door, Innyria, and five Shaslat wheeled onto the ramp beyond. The surviving Shaslat peeled off Innyria, hurtled past Rixby, and streaked down the corridor to attack Alice.

Alice planted herself to block the corridor and unloaded on them. She hit three Shaslat and pelted them to the ground. Their shrieks rent the air, and the last two tumbled over and over in a blinding flight straight for Alice.

Innyria vaulted to his feet, aiming both sidearms down the corridor. He hit one Shaslat, and the other plowed into Alice.

Alice bowled backward as the last Shaslat wrapped around her. She let out an enraged bellow. The Shaslat bound up her arms and legs so she couldn't shoot anymore.

Innyria stalked past Rixby, pointing his sidearms at the writhing mass on the floor, but he couldn't shoot the Shaslat without risking Alice, too.

Rixby hopped to her feet and shuffled over to them. She didn't know what to do until she got all the way over there. She bent over the two aliens contorting in and around each other in a seething mass of flesh.

Alice wrenched her neck and limbs in all directions, trying to free herself from the Shaslat's grip. Innyria holstered his left gun and grabbed the Shaslat by one of its limbs, but he couldn't unwind it. Its grip was too tight.

Rixby reacted without a thought for the danger. She couldn't let this thing kill Alice. She'd flown with Alice on the *Marathon* for years, and Alice had saved Rixby's life a dozen times.

She grabbed one of Alice's pounders, but the Shaslat pinned the gun in place. Rixby couldn't budge it, but she didn't have to.

She seized the Datrium magazine, snapped it out of the weapon, and stabbed the base into the Shaslat's limbs clamping tight around Alice's body. The plasma injection pin pierced the Shaslat's skin, and the plasma forked into the creature's body.

The Shaslat convulsed even tighter in her death throes. The alien jerked and shuddered. "Aargh!" Alice roared. "Get it off me! She's killing me!"

Rixby didn't move. She couldn't. She held the magazine jammed tight against the Shaslat's limbs. If she let go now, the assassin

would either kill Alice or come after Rixby and Innyria instead.

Innyria dropped his other sidearm and grabbed the Shaslat with both hands, trying to pry the thing off of Alice. “Keep it going, Rixby! Give her the whole dose! Don’t let her go!”

Rixby watched the plasma level dwindling lower and lower in the magazine, but the Shaslat still didn’t let go. The magazine injected more and more plasma into the assassin, but it would run out long before the Shaslat gave up.

Rixby made a split-second decision and snatched Alice’s other pounder. She wrenched off the plasma magazine on that weapon too, raised it, and stabbed it down next to the first.

The Shaslat let out an ear-splitting scream and gave one last powerful convulsion. Alice shrieked in a way Rixby had never heard before…and then the Shaslat released and relaxed. The twisted body slipped off Alice.

Innyria wilted and panted through his open mouth. “Let’s not do that again, shall we?”

Rixby listened with her head on one side. “They’re coming! Get up, Alice!”

Rixby helped Innyria as much as she could to untangle Alice from the Shaslat and pick up her guns.

“Where’s Eckhart?” Alice husked through her mask.

“This way.” Rixby set off down the corridor. “We’ll have to use the elevator. He’s in the lower levels. Where’s Dallas?’

“I don’t know. I dropped him off over by the Datrium storage area.”

Innyria stopped on a dime. “You *what*?”

Alice and Rixby kept walking. “He’ll knock out all the power,” Alice snapped over her shoulder. “So we’ll have to get down the elevator before he—”

At that moment, the lights lining the corridor cut out. Pitch dark fell over the three friends.

“I knew this was a bad idea,” Innyria whispered.

“Show us where to go, Alice,” Rixby instructed. “The elevator is past the second door on the left.”

“Follow me.” Alice led the way, and Rixby bumped into her fifty yards farther down the corridor. “The elevator isn’t here. We’ll have to climb down.”

“How do you mean?” Innyria asked.

Rixby approached Alice. “We’ll be in Vora’s audience hall when

we get to the bottom, so be ready to fight your way to Eckhart and fight your way out once we get him."

"Tell me again why I decided to do this," he whispered.

"Because Eckhart covered for you when you were younger," Rixby told him.

"Is there some reason you brought this loser along?" Alice snarled.

"Because Eckhart covered for him when they were younger." Rixby extended her arms to Alice, and Alice picked her up.

Alice propped Rixby on one hip and moved her guns to her other arm. "Hang on."

Rixby grasped hold of Alice as well as she could with her stumpy limbs. Alice pried open the elevator doors.

A shaft of daylight shone down the shaft from high above. The car was miles below them.

"How are we going to get down *there*?" Innyria asked.

"*We* aren't," Alice sneered. "*You're* gonna go home and suck your thumb while the rest of us rescue Eckhart. Goodbye, chickenshit."

He blanched one more time before Alice grabbed the elevator cables inside the shaft and slid down at breathtaking speed. She left Innyria standing there and slammed down hard on the car parked at the bottom.

She kicked through a grate at the same moment that Innyria landed hard next to her, but Alice was already springing down into the car.

The doors stood open to a cavernous room crowded to bursting with people. Aliens of all kinds bopped around the walls. They hardly paid any attention at all to Eckhart tied spread-eagle to four stakes in the middle of the floor in front of a large platform.

A massive Onzai crouched near his head with its razor limbs wrapped around Eckhart's body. Eckhart had his mouth open and his countenance contorted in a scream of pain, but Rixby couldn't hear him over the noise of so many aliens partying around him.

The bulbous fat monster on the platform jiggled in time to the dance music, and down near its elbow, Rixby spotted a fuzzy little ball of nothing. That tiny alien was the only person in the whole chamber paying attention to Eckhart's ordeal.

Rixby plunged into the throng just as Alice and Innyria opened fire on all the guests. Alice's pounders cut down dozens of people,

and the party exploded in a panicked stampede for the elevator the friends had just exited.

Rixby alone weaseled through their legs, making for the platform. She had to reach Eckhart fast. As soon as Vora realized the *Marathon* crew had showed up to steal him back from her, she might do anything. She might kill Eckhart here and now to stop him from escaping.

The guests herded toward the elevator, screaming and clawing and trampling each other to get out. They ran straight into Alice's guns, but it still took dozens of them falling before they realized that direction was too dangerous.

Those at the front realized first, of course. They tried to fight their way back through those in the rear still struggling to get through. More fell in the confusion until the whole mob veered and cut to the right, heading for a different exit.

Rixby got swept away in all their running legs. They kicked and pummeled her. They knocked her to the ground several times before she got back upright to continue her trek across the chamber.

Plasma blasts ricocheted off the walls. Bigawa guards and more Shaslat hurtled through the second exit, but they couldn't reach Alice and Innyria with so many guests blocking the way.

Another chaotic muddle ensued before the guests broke free. They charged for the exit, their pounding footsteps and petrified screams reaching an overwhelming din.

Alice and Innyria kept laying into them from behind, but when the guests got past the guards to make their getaway, an earth-shaking crash brought everyone to a grinding halt.

Dallas stormed into the chamber brandishing his assault guns, and the crowd scattered before him. They ran shrieking in all directions, and now they no longer stopped any of the friends from getting into the room.

Rixby broke through and scrambled to Eckhart's side just as Dallas carved a path forward from the other side. He leveled his guns at the Onzai and plugged the monster with matched forks of plasma.

Eckhart screamed again as the creature's tentacles gripped him tighter, but Rixby didn't try to free him. The servants on the platform were scurrying around the giant blob, trying to get the thing to safety.

The little furry puffball sprang the opposite way and sailed off the platform, straight for Eckhart. Rixby saw Vora coming.

Rixby dashed forward as fast as she could. She dodged Dallas's shoots and scooted around Eckhart. Vora was already halfway through the air, descending toward Eckhart's sprawled form.

Rixby pushed off with her flappy feet and caught Vora in both hands. The creature screeched and struggled to escape, but Rixby held on for all she was worth.

Both aliens hit the floor with gunshots going off all over the place. Dallas, Alice, and Innyria fought their way to Eckhart, and the guests poured through the exits the friends left unguarded.

The guards and assassins remained behind and hounded the friends to the platform. Dallas and Alice stationed themselves around Eckhart and defended Innyria while he cut Eckhart free, but more guards gathered all the time. They shoved into the chamber until as many assaulted the friends as guests who'd just fled it.

Rixby struggled with Vora on the floor, but Rixby wasn't built to fight anybody. Her short arms and legs left her unsuited to get a good grasp on the little thing, and Vora threw all her vicious energy into breaking free.

She squirmed in Rixby's hold and sank her needle teeth into Rixby's hand. Rixby squeaked in pain and Vora ripped away from her.

Vora skidded across the floor. Dallas and Alice were too busy protecting the friends from the massive force of guards arrayed against them. Innyria hooked one of Eckhart's arms around his neck to support Eckhart away, but they couldn't reach either exit. They were trapped.

Rixby shot to her feet to chase Vora, but Vora was already breaking away. She dove for a tiny hole in the floor barely big enough for Alice to stick her arm into. If Vora got into that hole, the crew would never catch her. She would escape to torment Eckhart another day.

Rixby scuttled after her, but she couldn't get there in time. Vora stretched out to slide the rest of the way to freedom when—

A crackle of plasma deflected off the floor and caught the creature from the side.

The blast careened Vora head over heel, and Bing advanced into the room, firing again and again. He tumbled Vora over and over until the little monster wheeled to a bloody pulp against the

opposite wall.

Bing ran over to Innyria and grabbed Eckhart. He spat a mouthful of Eplite onto Eckhart's tongue, shoved his rifle into Innyria's hands, and picked up Eckhart.

He pushed Bing away. "I'm okay! Give me a weapon!"

Bing didn't have another weapon to give him, but a weapon wouldn't help the crew now. Dallas faced the army of guards, and their shots bounced off his armor while he laid down a carpet of fire. Alice, Innyria, and Bing fired under Dallas's arms, but they couldn't do anything more than keep themselves alive. No one was getting out of this room.

Rixby looked around for any way out of this place. The servants must have taken the blob somewhere, but she couldn't see where.

She looked up at the ceiling in desperation when, without warning, a whirling, spinning black shadow dropped through the ceiling. It rotated in a blur, with lasers erupting in a sphere of destruction.

The thing plummeted in front of Dallas and a million lasers sliced into the guards. Their dismembered bodies toppled in swaths of blood and death, but the spinning ball didn't stop shooting. It cleared a path to the elevator.

"What the hell is that?" Innyria bellowed.

"It's Mozari!" Bing called. "Come on!"

The crew packed into the elevator. Dallas turned backward to guard their retreat, but the lasers cleared the room until no one stood against them.

Alice pushed Rixby between herself and Bing. The whole crew shrank from the black sphere when it got near the elevator. There was only one Mozari on this planet who could have helped the crew escape, but why would Ilke help them now, of all times? How could she, when she was trapped on the *Marathon* with Akkek?

The thing whizzed into the elevator and transformed into Akkek Stratha. She beamed up at Eckhart, and her petite form went in and out of transparency even now. Every now and then, one of the blurry pieces of transparent reality peeled away to become a Mozari appendage before it vanished again.

"Are you okay?" Akkek asked.

"What the holy hell are you doing here?" Eckhart croaked.

"It's nice to see you, too." She looked up at the black square where Alice had kicked the grate out…and the whole crew

evaporated upward in a blur.

Rixby felt her body become formless and ghostly. She ceased to exist…and yet she still existed. The friends zoomed through the elevator ceiling, up the shaft, through several layers of bedrock, and rematerialized on the tarmac outside.

Countless ships rocketed into the air, all racing for the *Marathon* parked a hundred feet away. Several fired on the ship, but their shots bounced off the Celdian shielding.

Rixby started to say she thought they ought to get the hell out of here, but before she could speak, Akkek disintegrated them all again.

They whisked across the base in a dizzy blur. Akkek dropped Dallas, Bing, Innyria, and Eckhart in the cargo hold, and kept on going. She carried Alice and Rixby to the bridge and deposited Rixby on her workstation.

Rixby and Alice both turned around to stare at each other in shock. Akkek was gone, but before either of them could react, the *Marathon*'s engines fired up by themselves.

Alice sprang to the regulators. "That rotten bitch is flying the damn ship!"

She dropped into the seat, took the helm, and the tactical web blinked on. Rixby went to work on her instruments. "We're still transparent! Vora's attack force is firing on us, but the shots are going straight through the hull."

"She isn't the only one with a few party tricks up her sleeve." Alice ripped the regulators back, and the *Marathon* sprinted up through the atmosphere.

"Akkek and Ilke are back in the Crick centrifuge," Rixby reported.

"Let 'em stay there," Alice snarled. "Give me a plain old gun battle any day of the week."

"Be careful what you wish for." A boom struck the ship.

"You said we were transparent!" Alice bellowed.

"We are! Vora's attack force...I don't understand it.'

"Who cares?" Alice punched the throttle and the ship ripped out of the atmosphere, with all the attack ships hot on its tail.

"Where are you going?" Rixby squeaked.

"You tell me!" Alice roared back. "Give me one destination where we can shake these assholes."

Rixby scrambled around on her workstation, but nothing

presented itself. More attack ships took off from Vora's base and started to overtake the *Marathon*.

"If you don't give me a destination in the next five seconds," Alice bellowed, "I'm gonna have to do something drastic. Just warning you."

"I'm sorry, Alice!" Rixby skimmed her charts even more feverishly, but every second drained her hope away. "We're heading into the Vermax system, but that's—"

"*Not* the Vermax system!" Alice snarled. "Anywhere but there."

Rixby took a breath. "The only other option is the Dothea system."

Alice actually took her hollow eyes off the tactical web to stare at Rixby. "Are you suicidal?"

"What else is there?"

Alice faced forward, and her breath rasped through her mask, fighting the regulators around in a steep curve.

Innyria and Bing entered the bridge just then. "What are you doing?"

"Getting away," Rixby told them.

Innyria pointed at the tactical web and his hand shook. "That's the Dothea system."

"I know what it is, jackass, now shut up," Alice snapped.

"But the electromagnetic field will—"

He barely got the words out before she plunged nose first into the atmosphere of the biggest planet. Innyria lunged for the regulators to stop her, but it was too late.

The ship crashed into an invisible barrier, and the tactical web vanished. Darkness enveloped the bridge as power switched off all over the ship.

Bing screamed, wheeling past Alice's chair. He and Innyria smashed into the front screen, and then an almighty force tore Rixby off her workstation. She hurtled through the air and landed on top of Bing.

She swam out of dizziness and and heard the unmistakable whine of the atmospheric gas shrieking across the *Marathon*'s hull. Celdian shields wouldn't protect the ship now, and with all systems offline, nothing would stop the ship from flying at terminal velocity into the ground. The ship was in freefall over an unknown planet with no way to stop it.

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LOST STAR

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1

Adam Eckhart stepped onto the *Marathon*'s bridge and caught a fleeting glimpse of the tactical web's interlaced laser pathways crisscrossing, surrounding the command station.

His Bion pilot Alice sat in Eckhart's usual chair, but she didn't fight the regulators to steer the ship. She stared into the vast abyss of the tactical web at the giant planet rushing toward the ship…or the ship was rushing toward *it*.

Tall buildings zoomed into view, and the *Marathon* hurtled on a collision course for a widespread city sprawling over hundreds of miles.

The next instant, the ship broke through an invisible electromagnetic field. The tactical web blinked out and the whole bridge plunged into crushing darkness.

Just before the blanket fell over Eckhart's eyes, he spotted Rixby standing on top of her workstation. Bing stood behind Alice's chair, and Innyria charged forward to do…something.

The next instant, all power died and the ship smashed into something incredibly solid and unforgiving. An unstoppable force hurled Eckhart forward. The agonizing crunch and rip of the hull drowned out screams and roars from all sides.

Eckhart struck a wall and fell hard on the floor. The hull shuddered underneath him, and shrieking sounds vibrated through it from other parts of the ship. Bodies fell on top of him, and he felt something furry. It was Rixby.

A low groan reached his ears from somewhere out in the dark. "Brace for impact!" he yelled, and grabbed Rixby with all his might.

Tentacles snaked around him in an unbreakable grip, but that slithering sensation made him feel better. Bing was with him, and whatever happened to him would happen to Bing and Rixby, too.

A second later, the ship smashed into something else, and this time, the collision ripped a gigantic section of the ship's nose off. Daylight streaked into the bridge and blinded Eckhart for a minute.

He dared to squint toward the breach and immediately regretted it. He stared through a jagged slash at giant skyscrapers rushing at him at impossible speed.

The ship was flying way too fast to avoid them, and from what he could see, the *Marathon* was descending rapidly into the city below.

If the ship hit one of those buildings, which it was bound to do any second now, the force would send the bridge crew spinning through the gap to nowhere.

"Hold onto something!" he bellowed.

He didn't know if anyone heard him, except that Bing's many limbs wound even tighter around Eckhart's body. Rixby screamed something, but Eckhart couldn't understand her.

He cast one desperate look around. The only thing near enough for him to hold onto was the navigation station. He heaved himself off the floor, but Bing's weight held him down.

Eckhart didn't try to extricate himself from Bing's appendages. He would need Bing when this was all over.

Eckhart rolled onto his side, crushing Rixby under his weight, but he deafened himself to her cries. He dove for the navigation station and hooked one arm around the pedestal holding it to the floor just as the ship collided with one of the buildings.

A devastating rumble shook the *Marathon*, and the breach tore even wider. Eckhart's forward momentum ripped him across the floor toward the hole.

He flung his free arm around Rixby and hung on to the pedestal with the last ounce of his strength. He covered Rixby with his body and tucked his head into her fur, praying to heaven on high that they made it out of this alive.

Screams mingled with the horrible sound of the ship's hull renting to pieces. The noise muffled for a second, and Eckhart made another grave mistake by stealing a peek out.

The ship had punched through one building, sailed into open space, and plummeted headlong into an even bigger building. Eckhart buried his face in Rixby's fur, resolved never to look out again until this was all over.

He didn't have a choice. The next smash yanked him away from the navigation pedestal against his best efforts to hold onto it. Rixby screamed again, and the last thing Eckhart saw was the little Lemaria extending her arms to him trying to hold onto him, too.

An instant later, he smacked into the wall right next to the breach and slammed down hard on the floor.

He swam back to consciousness feeling sick. His whole body

hurt and his head pounded. He coughed. “Bing…”

No one answered him. He almost passed out again when he tried to roll onto his side. His back, shoulders, and hips screeched in pain where he’d hit the wall. Where was Bing? Why didn’t Bing come to help him? Was the ship’s medic injured beyond saving? If anything happened to Bing, the whole *Marathon* crew was screwed, blued, and tattooed.

He pushed himself onto his hands and knees and crawled over to the navigation station. He pulled himself hand over hand until he leaned against it, but at least he was on his feet. None of his bones seemed to be broken. He just hurt like hell.

He blinked, and another wave of nausea hit him when he saw Bing and Alice bending over Innyria. The Urus security officer from Parilia lay on his side behind Rixby’s workstation, and he wasn’t moving.

Eckhart swayed on unsteady legs, took a chance, and staggered across the bridge. He collapsed next to Alice. “What’s wrong?”

Bing shot Eckhart a desperate look and went back to working on Innyria. As soon as Eckhart saw his old friend, he realized why Bing didn’t answer.

A giant shard of torn metal stabbed sideways through Innyria’s chest. Its gore-stained tip pointed at the ceiling from somewhere down on the floor. Eckhart couldn’t see Innyria breathing.

As soon as Eckhart showed up, Bing spat a mouthful of sticky black goo onto the ragged flesh around the embedded shard, but it couldn’t penetrate into Innyria’s chest.

Bing ran his wrist across his chin. “We have to get him to the infirmary now. I can’t do anything for him here.”

“You have to get this thing out of him.” Eckhart raised his hand to touch the shard, but Bing slapped his hand away.

“Don’t touch it! Go get the tool kit from the locker outside the bridge, Alice. You’re the strongest.”

“What are you going to do?” Eckhart asked. “You can fix him, can’t you?”

Bing gave Eckhart one look that answered that question. “I’d have to operate on him, and I can’t do that without power.”

“But you can heal him with Eplite as soon as you take the shard out, can’t you? Why don’t you just remove it and…”

Bing rounded on him with unusual venom. “Will you be quiet? Eplite only works on certain injuries. There are some things Eplite

can't do. You know that." Alice came back with the tool kit and opened it on the floor next to Bing. "Get out the saw." Bing turned to Eckhart. "How about you do something useful and go find Dallas? He can do this much quicker than we can."

Bing turned back to Alice and pointed underneath Innyria's body. "I'm going to lift him up while you cut it off from the floor. Understand?"

They went to work, but Eckhart didn't move. He stared down at Innyria. Eckhart had spent nearly twenty years putting Innyria and everything else from his own past on Parilia out of his mind. Now his heart twisted at the thought that Innyria might die right here on the *Marathon*'s bridge.

Eckhart had even convinced himself that Innyria had sold himself out to the criminal organizations on Parilia for his own gain. Eckhart didn't want to trust a guy like that, but Innyria didn't stay on Parilia. He'd left his post to help the *Marathon* crew save Eckhart from Vora's clutches.

Innyria would only do that if he felt he owed Eckhart a debt—which he did. Eckhart just didn't know Innyria remembered that debt. He thought Innyria had put it out of his mind along with the rest of the past, the same way Eckhart had.

Eckhart didn't even get a chance to thank his old friend for risking his life to save Eckhart's. If Eckhart left the bridge now, he wouldn't be here if and when Innyria died. He couldn't walk away from that.

Bing kept shooting Eckhart filthy looks while Alice sawed through the shard. The scraping noise snapped Eckhart out of his trance. "Why don't you use the laser?"

"Because the power is out, dope," Alice husked through her gas mask. "We just flew through an electromagnetic field."

"Go get Dallas, Eckhart," Bing snapped. "You aren't doing anything—" At that moment, Alice's saw broke through the shard and Innyria's body jerked in Bing's grasp. "Oh, good. We're through."

Bing stood up and wrapped his appendages around Innyria's body. Bing picked him up easily, but he held Innyria horizontally. He didn't turn Innyria on his back or straighten him up.

Alice raced ahead of him and opened the door leading out of the bridge. Bing headed for the exit, and Eckhart stood up to follow them when he remembered. He looked around. "Where's Rixby?"

“How should I know?” Bing growled over his shoulder. “Why don’t you find her, too?”

Alice and Bing disappeared onto the gangway behind the bridge taking Innyria to the infirmary. Eckhart stood where he was, trying to get his brain working, but when he scanned the destroyed bridge, he got another shock.

The hull breach through which he’d watched the *Marathon* crash on this planet had torn even farther open. The impact had severed nearly the whole front half of the bridge off. Eckhart stared through a gap nearly as big as the ramp that opened into the ship’s cargo hold downstairs.

He blinked, but no matter how hard he thought about it, he couldn’t get his mind to accept what he was seeing. The ship wasn’t lying crumpled and destroyed on the ground.

He gazed out over the wide city from at least a thousand feet in the air. A full 360º view showed him the whole landscape extending in all directions. Tall buildings surrounded him. Smaller ones hugged the ground far below him.

He took two steps toward the hull breach and had to struggle to compose himself. A barrier of reinforced Ioscesten glass separated him from a thousand-foot drop to the streets snaking beneath his position.

He advanced a few more steps and halted at the breach. The Ioscesten walls formed a barrier to the sky outside, and a solid floor stretched from the hull breach to the windows.

Several of the surrounding buildings were crumbling or partially collapsed. Trash, debris, and gaping holes dotted the buildings as far as Eckhart could see. No people moved in the streets or in the many windows surrounding his position. The city was utterly devoid of all life.

He stepped outside and his heels crunched in sand and debris. He advanced to the windows and stared out at the city. Then he turned around and confirmed his worst fears.

The *Marathon*’s front end—what was left of it—had embedded in the highest stories of a colossal skyscraper. The ship lay wedged between the floor and the ceiling, with its rear half hanging out in space hundreds of stories above the ground.

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2

Eckhart clambered back inside the bridge and searched everywhere for Rixby, but he couldn't find her. He kicked broken-off workstations aside, but he didn't find her anywhere.

He returned to his own chair, which was one of the only stations left intact, but when he tried to use the regulators to scan for her, he remembered. The ship was totally devoid of power.

He went through the whole bridge again and again. "Rixby! Rixby, where are you? Can you hear me? Are you hurt?"

She couldn't have fallen through the door leading to the gangway. It had stayed closed through the whole crash and she had been closer to the hull breach. After his fourth time searching and calling, he heard a tiny beep coming from the breach.

He hopped down to the skyscraper floor. "Rixby! Where are you?"

The sound came again, and he followed it to a pile of rubble behind the ship's crumpled hull. "Keep talking!" he called. "I can't find you!"

She didn't talk, but at least she kept making some sound. He pawed blocks and scraps of concrete out of the way until he found a dusty patch of fur.

"Oh, my God, Rixby!" He fell on his knees and scratched away the rest of the crap covering her up. "Talk to me. Where are you hurt?"

She only whimpered, but at least she was still making some noise. Her fur rose and fell with her breathing.

Eckhart laid his hand on her side and shoveled away the last stuff surrounding her. She lay face down under piles of debris, and some of the blocks had smashed her antennae.

Eckhart gulped. Losing Innyria was one thing. He couldn't lose Rixby, not after everything she'd done for him over the years. He couldn't remember all the times she'd saved his ass from his own reckless behavior.

"Easy, Rixby," he murmured. "We're gonna get you to the infirmary. Bing will fix you up."

She peeped again. He couldn't wait any longer. He hooked his

fingers around her body and tipped her out of the depression her form had made there.

She rolled into his arms and he cradled the little creature, gulping down a lump in his throat. He knew exactly nothing about Lemarian physiology. He didn't even know what was wrong with her, much less how to fix her.

Eckhart hugged her against his body, whispering down at her while he climbed back into the ship. "You're gonna be all right. You'll see. You're gonna be just fine. Just hang a little longer. I'm taking you to Bing."

"Eckhart," she rasped.

"I'm here, sweetie. I'm right here. I've got you. Bing is right around the corner. You're going to be all right."

Eckhart didn't know half of what he was saying. He didn't care. He only hoped he conveyed some more hope to Rixby than he felt himself. He couldn't lose her. He couldn't.

He took her to the infirmary to find Bing and Alice working on Innyria. "I found her."

Bing didn't turn around. "Put her over there." He nodded toward a different table, and Eckhart laid Rixby on it.

"She's pretty bad," Eckhart told him. "She might have internal organ damage."

"I'm busy."

Eckhart had never heard that cutting tone from Bing before—not in speaking to him, at least. Bing was always one of the friendliest, most easy-going people Eckhart knew.

Now Bing kept his back to Eckhart. Bing didn't even try to find out what was wrong with Rixby. "Aren't you even going to give her some Eplite? She could be dying."

Bing made a smacking noise and muttered something to Alice. Bing spun around, stalked across the infirmary, and bent over Rixby. He pushed some of the fur away from a perfectly round orifice in the lower part of her amorphous body.

He spat a mouthful of Eplite into it and straightened up. "Are you happy now? Now will you please leave me alone? You're only making my job harder."

Eckhart followed him over to Innyria. "Do you still want me to find Dallas?"

"You don't have to. We don't need him now that we cut the shard off."

Eckhart studied the shard. Bing had laid Innyria down on his side with the shard sticking up the same way it was when the *Marathon* crashed. “Aren’t you going to take the shard out?”

“How exactly do you suggest I do that?” Bing countered. “If I take it out now, he’ll bleed to death and I don’t have any way to stop the bleeding.” Eckhart opened his mouth to say something else, but Bing cut him off. “Go…do something. Just get out of here. I’ll deal with Rixby.”

Bing went back to working on Innyria. He and Alice seemed to be busy on something near Innyria’s face, but Eckhart couldn’t see what it was from here.

He glanced over at Rixby. Eckhart would have liked to do something for one of them or at least to help Bing, but he already had Alice. Eckhart didn’t know enough about medicine, much less about Urus or Lemarian medicine. There was nothing he could do besides distract Bing and get underfoot.

He went back to Rixby’s bed, but she showed no more sign of consciousness now than she had when he first brought her in. He couldn’t see that the Eplite was helping her antennae at all. Did she even know he was here?

He crossed to the exit and glanced back. No one saw him leave. Both Bing and Alice had their backs to him.

He stepped onto the gangway and looked around. Daylight streamed into the ship from an open door leading to the cargo hold. That was odd. That door shouldn’t be open.

He climbed down the stairs and went through it to discover that the ramp was open, too. It extended from the cargo hold into open air high above the ground.

Akkek Stratha sat on the overturned wreckage of Rixby’s downstairs workstation. Another medical kit lay open on the floor next to her foot, and she pressed a large bandage to the side of her face.

“What happened to you?” Eckhart asked.

Akkek grimaced at him through the one eye showing from under the bandage. “What happened to *you*?”

He had to smile at her. “The same thing, I guess. The ramp must have blown open when we crashed.”

“I opened it,” she growled. “I couldn’t see anything and there was blood all over the place.”

“Weren’t you in the Crick centrifuge when we crashed? Weren’t

you tying up Ilke so she couldn't get away?"

"I was, but going through the EM field must have knocked us out of integration."

"So where is she?" Eckhart asked. "Don't tell me she got away."

"She didn't go anywhere. We're on a planet with an EM field surrounding it. No ships can get in or out. Wherever she is, she isn't going anywhere."

"That's a small comfort. How are we supposed to find her?"

Akkek gave a cruel laugh. "When the time comes to leave this planet, I'll find her. She won't be able to hide from me."

"Well, I guess none of us is going anywhere for a while." Eckhart stuck his head into the Crick centrifuge. "We don't know if we'll be able to find parts on this planet anyway. We might not be able to repair the ship."

"You'll be able to repair it. I'm sure of it."

Eckhart smiled to himself. "You might be right about that."

"You made all the aftermarket modifications to this ship, didn't you?" Akkek asked. "When Ilke and I were integrated together in the centrifuge, I read her thoughts. She told me all about you."

Eckhart laughed for the first time since the crash. He had to think hard to remember how to laugh. "You definitely don't want to know *all* about me."

She put down the bandage saturated in blood. "We'll go hunting for parts and you'll fix the ship. Why do you doubt it?"

"Fixing the ship doesn't concern me. Even if we could get the ship up and running well enough to withstand traveling into space, we wouldn't be able to get through the EM field. We're stuck here, maybe forever."

"You fix the ship. When the time comes, I'll get us through the EM field. You don't have to worry about that."

Eckhart raised his eyebrows. "You can do that?"

"Sure. I'll just disintegrate the ship the way I did when we were fighting Vora's attack fleet. It's simple."

"If you can do that, why didn't you disintegrate the ship on the way through the atmosphere? We could have kept power and our Celdian shields would have protected us from all this damage."

"I couldn't because I didn't know Alice was going to fly through an EM field. I was busy holding Ilke in the centrifuge and I didn't realize which planet Alice was trying to reach. I would have disintegrated the ship if I had known."

Eckhart sighed. “I guess it’s too late to cry about it now.” He went over to the medical kit and pushed some of the instruments out of the way. None of them would be much good without power. “We better put some antiseptic on that cut before it—”

“Hey!” Bing yelled down the stairs. “We got a problem here! You better get up here fast!”

Eckhart took off at a run. He vaulted up the stairs and followed the sound of frantic voices to the crew quarters.

He pounded down the gangway and froze halfway there. Dallas Eldridge’s giant metal form blocked the gangway so no one could get through. His massive armored body covered the floor from one wall to the other. Bing and Alice kept hopping from one side of him to the other, but no one could move him.

Eckhart inched up behind Alice. “What’s wrong with him?”

“You can see what’s wrong with him!” Bing fired back. “He lost power when we entered the atmosphere.”

“Can’t you bring him back?”

“All his vital functions run on power. He’s more mechanical than organic. If we can’t bring his prosthetics back online, he’s dead.”

“How do you bring his prosthetics back online?” Eckhart asked.

“We can’t!” Bing thundered. “We need electronic recalibrators to restart his operating system, and we don’t even have any diagnostic equipment to find out if his systems are fried beyond repair. There’s nothing we can do.”

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3

Alice moved to Dallas' other side, and Eckhart squatted down next to his huge friend. He laid his hand on Dallas' chest. The Crionium armor didn't give at his touch. It felt so lifeless and cold all of a sudden.

Dallas had never felt that way before. Eckhart had touched his friend's armor a thousand times, but Dallas never felt as dead as he did now.

Bing was right. Dallas' body had died a long time ago, but his heart and his spirit dwelt on in this giant mechanical frame. He couldn't die. Eckhart couldn't accept that.

Dallas' fall hit Eckhart in a completely different way than Innyria's and Rixby's. Dallas had protected the *Marathon* crew so many times. Would Eckhart ever have had to nerve to do half the jobs he got away with if he didn't know Dallas was there to bail him out if he needed it?

"Give me that tool kit," Bing hissed.

Alice handed it over. "What are you gonna do?"

"I'm gonna do the only thing I can do." Bing took out a screwdriver. "I'm going to take off his armor. We might be able to resuscitate him by hand."

"You won't be able to resuscitate what's left of his brain," Alice countered.

"I don't care." Bing's voice cracked with barely suppressed emotion. "I have to do something. He's…he's my friend."

Bing bent over Dallas' thick chest plate, stabbed the screwdriver into Dallas' armor, and started unscrewing the plate. Every twist took forever, but Eckhart didn't move.

He didn't want to think about what they would find when they got Dallas' armor off. Eckhart had never been crass enough to ask Dallas point blank what organic parts he still had left inside his robotic body.

Eckhart assumed Dallas still had a few scraps of brain and maybe a heart and one lung…or part of one. Maybe he didn't even have that. Why did he need a heart to pump blood around a body he no longer had? His prosthetics carried out whatever functions he

still needed.

Still, Eckhart stayed close. He wanted to be on hand to help Bing in any way he could. They couldn't lose Dallas, not when they were stranded on a strange planet none of them knew anything about. They couldn't even access the records to find out the planet's name or what aliens might be native here.

Bing gasped for breath and strained his powerful limbs, trying to unscrew Dallas' armor. After what seemed like an eternity, he still hadn't removed one screw.

Alice leaned back on her heels. She didn't try to help. She trained her hollow eye sockets on Dallas' form, and Eckhart's heart dropped into his stomach.

Dallas looked so…so inhuman like this. The blank helmet showed no sign of eyes, nose, mouth, ears, or any expression that would make him human. He looked like a giant pile of scrap metal. He didn't look at all like the friend Eckhart knew. Dallas was gone. He wasn't coming back.

Just then, Akkek came strolling up the stairs. She turned down the gangway and stopped a few feet away. "What's going on?"

"Dallas," Bing panted. "He's…dying. We're trying to...save him."

"Why is he dying?" Akkek asked. "What's wrong with him?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Alice snarled. "His prosthetics need power to run his operating system. He shut down when we went through the EM field. We don't know how to get him up and running again."

"But doesn't Dallas run on a Datrium injector core?" Akkek asked. "That's what Ilke said."

"The Datrium injector core generates electricity that runs the rest of his systems," Bing gasped. "Datrium doesn't do him any good if his systems don't carry electricity. We don't even have the equipment to troubleshoot what's wrong with him."

Eckhart continued to gaze down at Dallas while Bing slaved over the one screw that wouldn't come undone. Eckhart didn't want to talk to Akkek right now. He couldn't lose all these members of his crew in one day. He couldn't face that.

Without warning, Akkek walked up behind Eckhart and stretched her arm past his ear. She placed her hand flat on Dallas' chest.

The instant she touched him, Dallas jerked awake. All his limbs twitched and his helmet snapped sideways once before he went back to staring at the ceiling. His deep booming voice came from

inside his armor: “Reinitializing…”

“Dallas—buddy!” Bing gasped. “Can you hear me?”

Dallas turned his helmet toward Bing and then Alice and finally toward Eckhart. “The *Marathon*…crashed…”

“We’re on the ground now.” Eckhart squeezed Dallas’ shoulder. Dallas’ armor felt so alive and warm and receptive now. “We were worried about you.”

Akkek left her palm flat on his chest. “His systems are all up and running, but he’s running low on Datrium. We’ll need to figure out a way to refuel him…and he needs nutrient, too.”

“If you reactivated his systems,” Bing asked, “could you do the same thing with our medical equipment?”

Akkek straightened up and moved back while Alice, Bing, and Eckhart helped Dallas to his feet. “I could, as long as it isn’t damaged in any other way.”

“Great!” Bing breathed. “I need you to help me with Innyria.”

“No problem.”

Eckhart turned to Dallas. “Are you back to full functioning—just like that?”

Dallas kept turning his head from one side to the other. “My systems are rebooting…and some of my systems are failing to reinitialize. They can’t connect to the *Marathon*.”

“Will they be able to once we get the *Marathon* up and running?”

“Who said anything about getting the *Marathon* up and running?” Alice rasped. “This ship is finished.”

“I don’t plan to stay on this rock for the rest of my life. I don’t care how long it takes to repair the ship, and once we do, we’ll need to restart all its systems.”

“If we do that, the systems will only shut down again once we try to leave the atmosphere,” Alice pointed out.

“I can disintegrate us through the atmosphere,” Akkek replied.

Alice turned her sightless eye sockets toward Akkek and let out a derisive hiss. “You’ll excuse me if I’d rather fly the ship the old-fashioned way.”

Eckhart started to say something when Dallas interrupted. He turned his helmet toward the stairs. “Where is Ilke?”

“What do you mean?” Eckhart asked.

“She isn’t on the ship.” Dallas touched the side of his helmet. “My sensors aren’t picking her up anywhere on the *Marathon*.”

Eckhart spun around to confront Akkek. “What happened after you disintegrated out of the Crick centrifuge?”

“I, uh.” She blinked up at him. “I don’t know. I didn’t see her.”

“Are you sure she isn’t on the ship?” Eckhart asked Dallas. “She couldn’t be hidden, or injured?”

“No Mozari life signs are showing up anywhere on this floor of the building, or anywhere else in my sensor range.”

Akkek whirled away. “I’ll find her. I have to retake her before she gets away.”

Eckhart dove for her and grabbed her elbow. “Hold it. You can’t go out there.”

“I have to! I’m responsible for holding Ilke and stopping her from helping the Bloody Blossoms carry out the Regiment’s plan.”

“You’re the only person who can get the ship off the planet. We need you free.” He waved toward Bing. “Two of my crew are barely holding onto life in the infirmary. I need you to go with Bing and help them before we wind up with two dead bodies on our hands.”

“No!” she protested. “Two people don’t mean anything. We’re talking about the Regiment potentially wiping out billions of fringe aliens.”

“I’ll go after Ilke,” Dallas volunteered.

“Are you sure you’re up for that?” Alice asked. “You just said your systems are only partially functional.”

“My sensors are the only way to find her—and I’m the only one with the weaponry to defeat her.”

Eckhart shrugged. “You might have a point there.”

“At least resupply on nutrient and Datrium before you leave,” Bing suggested. “Akkek says you’re depleted, and we don’t even know if you can use the apertures before you run out.”

“I can get the apertures up and running,” Akkek replied.

“The apertures need power,” Eckhart pointed out. “The ship is totally without power. You might be able to repair them if they’re damaged, but you won’t be able to give them a power supply or get them pumping without one.”

Akkek frowned. “Oh. Right.”

“Alice, you go with Dallas and see if you can get the apertures working. If you can’t, we’ll have to improvise another way to pump him full of Datrium and nutrient.”

“How will you do that?” Akkek asked.

“These apertures are one of my aftermarket inventions. If we

really have to, we can fall back on pumping him the way we did when he first came on board. We can even inject the shit into his ports by hand if necessary."

"Let's not," Dallas suggested.

Eckhart clamped him on the shoulder. "Just get yourself supplied. Then we'll talk about Ilke. You're more important right now." Eckhart pointed at Akkek. "You come with me."

Eckhart signaled Akkek and Bing to follow him to the infirmary. Eckhart went over to Rixby, but as soon as he got near her, she lifted her antennae off the table to goggle at him. No other part of her moved. "Eckhart…the tactical grid…"

"Lie down," he told her. "You got injured in the crash. Akkek is going to fix you up."

"She doesn't have to." Bing shouldered between Akkek and Eckhart. "She only needs more Eplite. I told you she didn't need extra medical attention. Innyria is the one who needs help."

He bent over and gave Rixby another dose of Eplite. He didn't even stick around to check if she recovered the rest of the way.

Bing, Eckhart, and Akkek assembled around Innyria's bed. "Is he still alive?" Eckhart rasped.

Akkek placed her hand on Innyria's shoulder. "Barely. We need to act fast."

"What are you going to do?"

"I can heal the wound, but we need to remove the shard first." Akkek looked up and met Bing's eye. "You're the medic here. Tell me what you want me to do."

"Can't you just disintegrate the shard out of his chest and seal the wound? Can't you just dissolve the shard and make it disappear?"

"I might, but I wouldn't like to do it now. It will be better if we remove the shard."

"You mean if *I* remove the shard," Bing corrected.

She tried to smile at him, but it turned out as more of a wince. Her features twisted in agony at the very thought.

Bing inhaled a deep breath. "All right. We need to turn him on his back."

He wrapped his tentacles around Innyria's body, lifted him bodily off the table, rotated him in midair where the shard wouldn't bump into anything, and replaced Innyria very gently down on the table.

Eckhart gulped when he saw his friend's face. Innyria's usually smooth, young features had shriveled to cling to his bones. He resembled more of a skeleton than a person.

"Get ready," Bing ordered.

Akkek positioned herself on one side of Innyria's body and rested her hand on his shoulder. The shard stuck through his chest from side to side now. "I'm ready when you are."

Bing stood on Innyria's other side. He placed one limb on Innyria's shoulder and wrapped his other arm around the thicker end of the shard.

Bing braced himself, and his whole body tensed. Akkek shut her eyes. Bing growled under his breath and pulled the shard out with one almighty tug. "Now!"

Akkek didn't move. The instant the shard slithered out of Innyria's chest, the entry and exit wounds started to close, but Bing didn't wait around to see that.

He grabbed Innyria, pried open the Urus's mouth, and spat two large doses of Eplite onto Innyria's tongue.

"He doesn't need Eplite," Akkek told him. "He's fine—"

Innyria shot off the table with a roar and knocked Bing out of the way. Innyria bared his teeth and spun this way and that, searching the infirmary.

Eckhart strolled over and squeezed Innyria's lower leg. "You okay, buddy?"

Innyria stared at him, panting. "Eckhart!"

"Yeah. It's me, remember? You're on my ship. You're on the *Marathon*."

Innyria's hand flew to his head. "Oh my God! This is a disaster!"

"I wish I could tell you we'll get you back to Parilia, but I wouldn't want to make a promise I can't keep."

Innyria groaned. "Oh, well. I guess they'll find another security officer."

"Eckhart," a squeaky voice interrupted from the other exam table.

Eckhart went over to Rixby. "How are you feeling?"

"Can I get up now? I want to check on the bridge."

"You can get up if you can do it without falling over, but there's nothing to check. The bridge is a wreck and the ship is without power."

"I want to go to the bridge, too," Akkek added. "I might be able

to read how much damage there is that needs repair."

Eckhart snorted. "I already know how much damage there is that needs repair."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll show you." Eckhart turned back to Innyria. "How are you feeling? Do you feel strong enough to get up?"

Innyria glanced down at the floor. "I'm not sure."

"There's nothing wrong with you," Akkek told him. "I can read your internal organs from here."

"I'll give you some more Eplite," Bing added. "That will make you feel stronger, and it should reduce any effects of shock you might still feel."

Innyria frowned at Bing. "How did you get a Yakit on your crew, Eckhart? Do you know how valuable these things are?"

"He got me on his crew by being such a charming, hospitable host—not to mention paying well." Bing clapped Eckhart hard on the shoulder. "You won't find a better boss anywhere on the fringes, man. You should really consider leaving the Chosen or the Immortals or whoever it is you're working for this weekend. Eckhart is the man."

Eckhart knocked Bing's hand off his shoulder. "Knock it off. You aren't getting a pay raise no matter how much you kiss my ass."

Bing finally laughed, and the harshness went out of his tone. He crossed to Rixby's table, picked her up, and set her on the floor. "Let's get to the bridge and find out just how many decades we're gonna be stuck on this planet."

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4

Eckhart pulled open the door, and the *Marathon* crew stepped onto what was left of the bridge. It looked so much worse, now that Eckhart had gotten over the initial stunned horror of finding out where the ship actually was.

The sunlight streaming through the hull breach looked brighter, now that the sun had moved around the building and sliced directly through the high windows beyond.

Debris, ripped hull sections, dust, and destroyed workstations littered the floor. They flowed out through the hull breach to scatter outside.

"Holy shit!" Innyria whispered. "This ship is toast."

"No, it isn't," Akkek breezed. "I can fix it."

"Is there anything you can't fix?" Bing asked.

"I can't fix *that*." She pointed at the hull breach. "I can't disintegrate or integrate what isn't there, but if you find some steel plates, I can integrate them into a new hull." She beamed at Eckhart. "You're good at salvaging things."

Eckhart heaved a great sigh. "Yeah. I am."

"That means going out into the city to salvage." Rixby went over to what was left of her own workstation. She tried to turn it over, and when she failed, Bing walked over to her, picked it up, took one look at it, and threw it back down on the floor. "We'll need defenses for that."

"Dallas can defend us." Eckhart checked the regulators on his own station even though he knew they weren't working. "Once we get everything repaired, we'll need to restart the Datrium injector core to generate power before we even think about breaking orbit."

"We aren't breaking orbit until we find Ilke," Akkek told him. "We aren't leaving her on this planet. We have to take her back with us to face justice."

"Who's gonna give her justice?" Eckhart countered. "The Bloody Blossoms are working for the Regiment. We can't turn her over to either of them."

"We could turn her over to one of the gangs," Rixby replied. "The Lion Tribe hates the Mozari. They'll destroy the Bloody

Blossoms if they find out that they were conspiring with the Regiment to wipe out the fringe aliens."

"We can't turn her over to the Lion Tribe," Bing argued. "The Lion Tribe is trying to kill *us*."

"You mean the Lion Tribe is trying to kill *me*," Eckhart corrected.

"There has to be a way," Bing insisted. "We could find another way to turn her over to them."

"None of this means anything until we get the ship repaired," Innyria interjected.

"None of this means anything until we recapture Ilke," Akkek added. "If you'd let me go after her, I would have her by now."

"Can you get the ship through the atmosphere while you're still holding Ilke?" Eckhart asked.

Akkek looked away and didn't answer him. That was all the answer Eckhart needed.

"There is one option we haven't thought of," Rixby chimed in.

"What's that?" Eckhart asked.

"We could leave Ilke here. Recapturing her will take a whole lot of guns, and we might not even succeed. If we took the *Marathon* back into orbit, she wouldn't be able to leave the planet. She'd be imprisoned here forever."

"She would still be at liberty," Akkek countered. "She would live her life on this planet without anyone bothering her."

"She would be separated from her sisters," Rixby pointed out. "That might be a fate worse than death for a Mozari."

"We can't do that," Akkek argued. "She and the other Bloody Blossoms are plotting to kill millions, if not billions, of people. We have to stop them, and the only way to do that is to take her with us."

Rixby waved her antennae at Akkek. "Why is that the only way? Why can't we stop the Bloody Blossoms without her?"

"Because she's the only one of the Bloody Blossoms we have," Akkek told her. "We can use Ilke to convince whoever's going to pass judgment on her that this plot is real. We can't just go rampaging through the Forsaken Pyramid and wipe out all the Bloody Blossoms."

Bing laughed nervously. "Sounds like fun. Let's go."

"Even if we went to some authority figure with this story," Akkek went on, "we would need a way to convince them that the

Bloody Blossoms really cut this deal with the Regiment. It doesn't matter who we went to to try to stop the Bloody Blossoms. How would we convince them? How would we make them believe that we're telling the truth if we don't have Ilke?"

"Aren't we putting the cart before the Iviun?" Innyria asked. "We don't have a ship that can fly, and we don't have the power to fly one even if we did. What difference does it make if we get Ilke back or not?"

"You're right," Eckhart replied. "Let's get busy. Bing, go get Alice and Dallas. Tell them that as soon as Dallas is fed and restocked with Datrium, we need them both to arm up to go scavenging for parts and scrap metal to fix the ship."

Bing left, and Akkek went over to Eckhart's chair. "Can you check it for damage?" he asked her.

She rested her hand on the regulators. "Most of the systems are fried, but I can clear those. It's the hull breach I can't fix."

Eckhart glanced right and left. Rixby was still sifting through all the broken rubbish carpeting the bridge. Innyria went out to the windows to survey the strange city where the *Marathon* had crashed.

Eckhart took advantage of the lull. "Listen to me," he murmured to Akkek. "I want you to stay here when we go out scavenging."

"Why should I? I can find stuff easier than you can."

"Not with Alice and Dallas around. Besides, Rixby will still be here."

"Why do you want me to stick around, then? I'll be much more useful to you out there."

"I'm not worried about finding steel plate and parts for the ship. I can do that all day long. It might take a while, but I'll get the ship running. I always do."

"What's wrong, then? Why do you want me to stay behind?"

Eckhart glanced around again. Rixby had her antennae under the broken remains of her workstation. She wasn't listening.

"I want you to stay here because you're the only one who can get the ship off the planet. Any of the others can fly the ship—except Bing and Dallas. That's not my point, though. Rixby can fly the ship if she has to, but you…"

"Is going out scavenging really that dangerous?"

"I don't know. I don't know anything about this planet. Anything could happen. If some of us go down, I want you here to

get the ship away for whoever is left."

She nodded. "I see."

"So? Will you stay?"

"No."

Eckhart threw up his hands and whirled away. "Oh, for Christ's sake!"

"As soon as you find Ilke, I can bind her. I can stop her from blowing out the hull all over again when we try to leave orbit."

"You said you couldn't bind her and disintegrate the ship at the same time."

"Dallas or someone can hold onto her while I disintegrate the ship. All the other times, I have to bind her. It's the only way to stop her from escaping."

Eckhart groaned and covered his eyes. "This whole thing is getting way too complicated."

"Do you have a better plan?"

"Yes, I do, as it happens. You stay here. We capture Ilke and bring her back. Then you can—"

"How will you capture her without me?"

"Believe it or not, we do have ways of accomplishing things without you. We managed pretty well before you came along."

She snorted. "You call that managing pretty well?"

"Yes, I do. I built this ship with my bare hands, and I can do it again without any help from you." He saw the smirk on her face and forged ahead. "It might take much longer, but it will still work. Stay here."

He started to turn away when a squeak caught his ear. He thought at first that Rixby might have found a way to fix her workstation, but the noise came from a different part of the bridge.

This sound came from the hull breach, and when Eckhart glanced over, he stopped when he spotted a tiny alien standing there. It peered through the breach with huge eyes too big for its diminutive head. Its miniature stature didn't raise its long nose above the floor.

"What *is* that?" Eckhart whispered.

Rixby waddled forward and undulated her antennae at the alien. "We landed on Sorix. That's the largest planet in the Dothea system, and it's the only planet in the system that once had an advanced civilization. This is one of the native species. It's…" She moved her antennae faster, accessing the vast store of knowledge in her

memory. “The species is also called Sorix in the records.”

Eckhart took a tentative step toward the little creature. “Do they speak English?”

At that moment, the bridge door opened again and Bing came back. “Eckhart—”

Eckhart held up his hand behind him. “Quiet. Don’t scare it away.”

“I hate to be the one to break it to you, but you’re gonna want to hear this right away. Dallas is gone, and so is Alice.”

Eckhart spun around fast. “What?”

“Dallas is….”

“I heard you!” Eckhart exclaimed. “What the hell! Where are they?”

Bing shrugged. “They’re gone, and they took a few weapons with them…and by a few, I mean, an Alice-sized few.”

“They must have gone after Ilke.” Akkek whirled away to leave the bridge. “I’m going after them.”

Eckhart snatched her elbow as she passed him. “I said no. We need you here.”

She yanked at her arm to free herself. “Let go of me. You have no right to hold me here.”

“All our lives depend on you disintegrating the ship. I can’t let you go out there and—”

Another squeak interrupted him. Eckhart glanced toward the breach to see another Sorix pop its little head above the floor. Its large, glassy eyes took up nearly all of the top half of its head.

Eckhart waved at Rixby. “Can you communicate with them?”

She took a few more waddling steps toward the breach, but before she could say anything, another Sorix stepped out from behind the first.

Before anyone could move, two more appeared behind the second one, and in half a second, more and more materialized out of nowhere. The first few that showed their faces hopped into the breach.

They didn’t waddle like Rixby. They bounced on springing little legs and squeaked in high-pitched beeps and peeps. They sprang toward Rixby, and more Sorix entered through the breach. More and more pounced onto the floor and pressed in behind their comrades.

In a matter of seconds, dozens of them crowded the bridge, with

more coming in all the time. Eckhart tried to back away, but that only seemed to encourage them. Hundreds of them flooded the area between the *Marathon* and the windows beyond. They all pushed forward to get inside the bridge.

They surrounded Rixby, peeping in a seething tide of noise. They ringed Eckhart, staring up at him with their large eyes. Their beeps became so insistent and so many of them beeped at once that he couldn't distinguish one voice from the next.

"What the hell is this?" he yelled over at Rixby.

"It's an invasion!" Bing backed toward the door, but more Sorix cut him off. They packed around everyone until no one could move.

"Get them out of here!" Eckhart yelled, but no one could do anything about them. There must have been five hundred Sorix jammed into the bridge, with at least a thousand outside waiting to get in.

"They're frightened!" Rixby called over the noise. "They want us to protect them."

"Protect them!" Eckhart yelled back. "We can't even protect yourselves."

"They're afraid of something." Rixby bent her antennae toward the Sorix, trying to hear them.

"Can you hurry this up?" Eckhart demanded. "We're supposed to be salvaging ship parts, not hosting a damn—"

"They want us to do something about…" Now it was Rixby's turn to squeak. "They're afraid of Ilke!"

Eckhart, Akkek, and Bing all yelled at the same time. "Ilke! Where is she?"

"She's out on the street. She's rampaging through the city. She's killing Sorix by the dozen. They're terrified of her. They want us to stop her."

"Wonderful," Eckhart sneered. "That doesn't narrow down where she is."

"Now will you let me go with you?" Akkek asked. "I can find her in seconds."

"No!" he bellowed. "Stay here….and Rixby, tell them to stay here, too. For God's sake, don't let them follow us."

"How are you going to find her without Akkek or them?" Bing asked.

"Don't ask questions. Get yourselves armed and we'll—"

"Don't you mean 'yourself'?" Bing asked. "If Rixby and Akkek

stay here, it will just be you and me."

Eckhart paused. "Fine. You can come."

Akkek pumped her fist. "Yes!"

"Can you not be so enthusiastic about it? If anything happens to you, we're all screwed."

She shrugged. "You were managing pretty well before I came along."

"Don't forget Innyria," Rixby added. "He could go with you."

"I don't want him out there when he just recovered from an injury like that." Eckhart pointed at Rixby. "Tell them we'll stop Ilke, but only if they stay here."

"They don't want to go," Rixby replied. "They say you'll be able to find her by following the laser shots."

Eckhart didn't ask any more questions. He waded through the Sorix to the bridge door. Bing ducked through first. Eckhart stood guard to stop the Sorix from overrunning the rest of the ship, but true to their word, they didn't try.

Eckhart and Bing vaulted down the stairs to the cargo hold and attacked the weapons locker in a hurry. Eckhart loaded himself with every gun he could lay his hands on, but even as he checked and loaded them and stuffed his pockets with rockets, he knew it would never be enough.

Ilke's lasers could fire faster than any weapon in the *Marathon*'s arsenal. Her lasers could cut a person in half. She was only one woman, but he and Bing didn't stand a chance against even one Mozari.

Only two people could stop her: Dallas and Akkek.

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5

Dallas paused at a street corner and angled his helmet from one direction to another.

“Can you pick up anything?” Alice husked next to him.

“No Mozari life signs, but I pick up plenty of alien life.”

“Mozari *are* aliens, big guy,” Alice growled. “How do we find her if you can’t detect her life signs?”

“She’s too far away for me to detect any life signs, but I can hear something.”

“I can hear something, too, genius,” Alice muttered. “Don’t be a smartass.”

“Do you hear that?”

Alice froze and cocked her head to one side. “What is that? It sounds like screaming.”

Dallas glanced up at the sky. “Hold onto me.”

He didn’t wait to get her permission. He put his arm around Alice’s middle and jumped.

He soared up at speed and landed on the roof of a nearby building. He still wasn’t as high as the *Marathon* and several skyscrapers still flanked his position, but it was high enough.

“Shit on a stick!” Alice hissed. “What the holy Christ is she doing?”

Dallas gazed into the distance. A faint flash of light erupted out of a remote part of the city. A halo of laser light sprayed from behind a cluster of warehouses. It formed a glowing dome, but he couldn’t see whatever was on the ground making it. He didn’t need to see it.

“We need to get over there fast.”

“Too bad we don’t have a ship,” Alice remarked.

He turned his back to her. “Climb on.”

He bent over and Alice clambered onto his back. Her many pounders banged against his armor, but he didn’t care. He hooked one beefy arm behind her back and clamped her on.

He activated his jet thrusters from his helmet and they blasted from the soles of his feet. The propulsion jets burst into the roof on which he stood and he lifted into the air.

He soared over the city getting closer to the site. “Land a few blocks away,” Alice yelled into his ear. “We don’t want her to see us coming.”

“She already knows we’re coming,” Dallas called back.

“How?”

Dallas didn’t answer. He knew Ilke far too well to think she wouldn’t anticipate him coming after her. Eckhart wouldn’t send anyone else on his crew to apprehend her. She was too dangerous.

Dallas descended seven blocks from the spot where Ilke’s lasers had sprayed from behind the buildings. The screaming noise sounded louder here. He hated to find out what she was doing over there.

He touched down and Alice slipped off his back. She rearranged her weapons, and the two friends advanced one block at a time.

Dallas paused at every corner and extended his periscope to scan the area. It rose from the top of his helmet so he didn’t have to show himself to see what was going on.

He and Alice reached the final block. The deafening noise echoed off the walls. Dallas had to turn down his audio receptors to compensate.

“What is she doing?” Alice hissed.

Dallas extended his periscope again and his nerves prickled at what he saw. “Jesus Christ!”

“What?” Alice adjusted her grip on her pounder and took a step forward, but Dallas pulled her back.

“There are native aliens out there.”

“What’s she doing to them?”

“She’s toying with them.”

Alice inched toward the corner and moved one of her eye sockets to the edge. She sucked her breath through her mask and immediately dodged out of sight.

Dallas swiveled his periscope back and forth, taking in the whole horrific scene. Ilke hovered at the head of a blind intersection. Several streets joined up at the intersection with dead ends blocked in by brick walls.

Dozens of tiny aliens crowded in the alley ends and cowered against the walls. Dallas’ helmet couldn’t access the *Marathon*’s records, but his operating system still contained enough residual information to identify the Sorix.

Their combined peeps and beeps joined into a scream that

chilled Dallas' heart. Ilke spun in a sphere of outward firing lasers. She bombarded the walls with hundreds of shots, but she didn't hit any of the Sorix.

"She's sick!" Alice rasped. "She's murderous."

"She isn't killing any of them—not anymore." Dallas scanned the surrounding streets. Ilke had left plenty of dead Sorix all over town, but she wasn't cutting down these aliens. Why?

She aimed her lasers with deadly accuracy. She slashed deep cuts in the brick walls and surrounding buildings. She pulverized structures and devastated walls, but only the ones without any Sorix either inside them or hiding behind them. She targeted her lasers with pinpoint skill to avoid killing any more Sorix.

Dallas brought his periscope down. "What do you want to do?" Alice whispered. "We have to stop her before she kills them all."

"She won't kill them all. She's doing this to get attention."

"Attention!" Alice croaked. "You're joking, right?"

"Stay here, and when you see the fireworks, start shooting."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"It means start shooting when you see the fireworks." Dallas turned away.

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to give Ilke what she wants. Just stay out of sight until you see—"

"The fireworks. I got it."

He reignited his jet thrusters, but not to full power. He lifted off the ground just a few inches and soared to his right. He only did it to prevent Ilke from hearing his footsteps, but she probably couldn't hear them over the noise she was making anyway.

He flew several blocks away and landed behind a different building. He took one more look with his periscope. The situation hadn't changed. That left Dallas only one option.

He made one last check of his internal systems. His Datrium levels were at maximum. He wouldn't find a better time to act than now.

He stepped out into the open and tromped up the street. He didn't try to mask his footsteps now. He exaggerated them, but she still didn't hear him until he came up right behind her.

The sphere of lasers shooting out from the center blasted all the walls to smithereens. Masses of Sorix huddled at the end of the alley. Her lasers pinned them down and left no way for them to

escape. They scurried back and forth against the walls with lasers spraying all around them, but they couldn't get away.

He got halfway to the intersection before Ilke noticed him. She stopped instantly, and all her lasers died as she came to a standstill.

Her many tentacles slithered around her in sinuous patterns of sensual delight and a peaceful smile spread over her lips. "Dallas! I knew you'd come."

"Leave them alone, Ilke. You got what you wanted. Now come back to the *Marathon*."

"What will you do with me once you get me on board the *Marathon*, Dallas?" she purred. "Will you take me back into your quarters?"

Dallas tensed. He knew it would come to this. He'd prepared himself for it mentally, but he still couldn't completely deny the effect she had on him.

A little voice whispered in the back of his mind, *She's trying to trick you. She lured you out here because you're the only one strong enough to defeat her.*

He knew that rationally, but it still didn't help. She would only run away from the *Marathon* for one reason: she had to get away from Akkek.

If Ilke wanted to be totally free and never face any reckoning for her treachery, she had to get rid of Dallas. That was the only reason she would put on a show like this. She knew Dallas would come after her. She knew he would take it as his personal responsibility to stop her rampage.

That sinister smile on her beautiful countenance told him all that, but she still made him hesitate. He didn't extend his assault guns from their slots on his arm prosthetics. He told himself that showing his hand too soon would only spark a preemptive strike from her.

Was that the real reason? Did he hesitate because he still felt something for her…or was that all part of her manipulative, hypnotic effect on him? He couldn't tell anymore.

The minute she mentioned him taking her into his quarters, he couldn't get that image out of his head. What would it be like to touch and feel a real woman again? He thought he had forgotten all about that when he lost nearly all of his organic body in exchange for these prosthetics.

Her words exploded it all into his mind as though those thoughts

had never left. He could practically smell her as if it was yesterday. Was she doing that to him? Could a few words trigger all those memories?

Alice. He had to remember Alice. She was hiding just a few blocks away. Alice was waiting to attack Ilke to help him subdue her, but Alice wouldn't attack until she saw that Dallas was ready. Would Dallas ever be ready to fight Ilke? Had he *ever* been really ready to go all the way and kill her if necessary?

Ilke glided across the pavement, getting closer to him all the time. If he waited much longer, she would touch him, and he didn't know what he would do if that happened. Would he be able to draw his guns on her at all?

"You missed me, didn't you, Dallas?" Was she whispering? Was she making any sound at all or did he only imagine it? "I always loved you, Dallas. I never stopped loving you."

He didn't move. He scanned her body and didn't detect any sign that she was preparing to shoot him. Could her lasers cut through his armor? He had never been shot by a Mozari before, and he didn't want to find out.

Her hair undulated around her petite face in a million strands of living death. Her black eyes glittered with hidden fire and her mesmerizing power made his head spin. She floated to a halt right in front of him. He couldn't see or think of anything but her.

"You wouldn't hurt me, Dallas," she murmured. "You always had a loving heart. You couldn't drag me back to my death. You couldn't do that to me. You love me too much. Let me stay here. Go back to the *Marathon* and tell Eckhart you couldn't find me. I won't hurt anyone here. I'll stay here and live out my life in seclusion. Isn't it bad enough that I'll never see my sisters again? I can't do any harm here. You can leave and tell everyone that you left me here. I'll be alone for the rest of my life, but at least I'll be safe."

He gazed down into her eyes…and her eyes flickered in a barely perceptible shift of her gaze across his helmet. That was nothing he hadn't seen a thousand times. People couldn't tell where on his helmet to look to make eye contact with him, because he didn't have any eyes left.

At that moment, a flying block sailed over the nearest building and Dallas lunged for Ilke. He caught her in his arms and tackled her backward onto the pavement. He pinned her down with all his strength and bowled her over and over to get her as close to the

Halfanite block as he could.

His sensors detected where the block was, but he lost sight of it in the mayhem that followed. He could only estimate where it landed, and he whipped Ilke over onto her side with her back facing the block.

She erupted into a spinning ball of exploding lasers. She fired with unbelievable ferocity, but Dallas held onto her. He held tightly enough and closely enough to his body that she couldn't hit him. Her tentacles twisted and whipped behind his back, shooting away from him.

He tumbled to a stop and tucked his head inside the ball of lasers. He shut down all his auditory and visual sensors just in time for the Halfanite block to detonate behind Ilke's back.

The blast punched into her so hard it lifted her and Dallas off the ground. He skidded backward, still crushing her in a death grip.

Her lasers died under the impact and, in that moment of reprieve, Alice charged out from her hiding place. She lugged two huge pounders and opened fire with every rocket she had.

Dallas launched to his feet, hauling Ilke's limp form with him. He turned around to hold Ilke between himself and Alice. Four rockets unleashed from her guns. They corkscrewed across the intersection and converged on Ilke, but Dallas didn't let her go.

He hunkered behind her and braced his legs into the pavement to take the blast, but when the rockets got within a few feet of smashing her to oblivion, Ilke recovered. Her tentacles lashed forward and her lasers caught the rockets in midair.

They smashed in a brutal explosion that smacked Dallas and Ilke backward. Dallas' powerful legs left the ground and he hurtled away to slam into one of the few walls Ilke hadn't yet destroyed.

She struck with unbelievable speed and streaked out of his grip before he could catch her. He vaulted to his feet, but she was already sprinting across the intersection on a dead course for Alice.

Alice stalked into the intersection unloading all her rockets on Ilke, but it wasn't enough. Ilke's lasers spewed outward in a solid ball of energy. She rotated over and over, bursting every rocket to nothing.

She soared through the blasts as though they were never there. Her lasers prevented any shrapnel or burning gas from touching her.

Alice backed off a step and scrambled to reload, but Ilke was

moving way too fast. Dallas straightened up and slotted out his assault guns. He had to draw Ilke's lasers back toward himself. That was the only way to save Alice.

He opened fire and rained shots on Ilke's lasers, but he couldn't even tell if she could feel them. She didn't break off her assault against Alice. Ilke would collide with Alice any second now. Dallas couldn't let that happen.

He activated his jet thrusters to full power and launched for her. He pounded her with his guns, but to no effect. He rocketed across the intersection and prepared himself to fly straight into her lasers. If they could cut through his armor, he would be dead before he ever touched her, which meant that Alice would be dead, too.

He tucked his chin and channeled as much of his Datrium reserves into his armor as he could. He didn't know if this would work, but he had to try. He could think of a thousand reasons to take her back to the fringe aliens to face justice for betraying her own people to the Regiment.

He could think of even more reasons to finish Ilke right here and spare the rest of the galaxy from her presence. If that meant dying himself, he would take that chance.

He withdrew as many of his sensory functions as possible and bent his head even lower. Alice managed to get off a few more rockets. They slowed Ilke down just enough for Dallas to catch up with her.

He caught a moment's glimpse of her at the center of her ball of light. Her hair scattered from her head, with thousands of lasers shooting from every strand. Her tentacles whirled in a mystical vortex, with her face and body in the eye of the storm.

Her beautiful face had transformed into something monstrous. She no longer looked human, or like anything remotely recognizable. Black waves of radiation throbbed from her skin and her murderous, grinning mouth. Her eyes smoldered in the center, seeing nothing but death.

The next instant, Dallas' Datrium-charged armor struck her field and a cataclysmic explosion knocked out all Dallas' systems. He blacked out and crashed down hard on the pavement.

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6

Eckhart, Bing, Innyria, and Akkek stepped out of the hull breach in the *Marathon*'s bridge. Eckhart looked around. "Let's see if we can find some stairs or something. Dallas and Alice must have used them to get down to the street."

"They didn't need them," Bing replied. "Dallas could use his jet thrusters to carry them down there. He could have jumped off the ramp."

"Well, we can't. Now will you quit wasting time and find the stairs?"

"You don't need to," Akkek replied. "I can disintegrate us to the street. I can disintegrate us to Ilke's location."

"I'm getting really sick and tired of disintegrating everywhere," Eckhart muttered.

Bing laughed. "One of these times, you won't reintegrate, and then where will you be?"

"Nowhere, I guess. I'd rather take the stairs."

"That will waste valuable time." Akkek came toward him and held out her hand. "Come on. Let's go."

Eckhart puffed out his cheeks and sighed. "I'm really starting to wish I took you to Imeliv H8 like you said."

"Too late now."

He took her hand. "Take us to where she is, but don't drop us right on top of her. Put us down at least a few blocks away so we can see what the situation is before we get our heads shot off."

Akkek held out her hand to Bing, and as soon as he touched her, the whole world blurred. Eckhart felt himself being ripped across miles of terrain.

In a split second, he came to a halt between two giant skyscrapers. "I don't think we need to wonder where Ilke is," Bing replied. "Christ, what the hell is she doing?"

Akkek cocked her head and pricked up her ears. "It sounds like she's slaughtering Sorix."

"Why is she killing them?" Bing asked. "If she wants to get away, shouldn't she be hiding instead of destroying the planet?"

"She isn't trying to hide," Eckhart replied. "She wants to be

found."

"Why?" Akkek asked. "It makes no sense."

"Ilke must not have revealed everything she knew when you two were integrated in the Crick centrifuge. It sounds like she kept some very valuable personal information from you."

"What do you mean?"

A deep, ground-shaking explosion vibrated the pavement under Eckhart's feet. He stole a peek around the nearest corner and dashed to the next building to get closer to Ilke's location.

He had a pretty good idea why Ilke had gone on a killing spree in this city rather than just disappearing into the background. He didn't tell Akkek what it was, though, and he didn't like it. He should have thought of this before he let Dallas go after her. That was a mistake, especially since Dallas wasn't at 100% himself.

Eckhart sprinted to the next building. Incessant pounding rocked the city. He was close, too close to talk to his two friends.

He pointed at Bing and then toward the opposite corner of the building. Bing nodded and the two men split up. Bing crouched down in his position and started preparing Halfanite blocks to detonate. That guy loved his Halfanite.

Eckhart took a fresh grip on his weapon and dodged his head into the open just long enough to see Alice launch four rockets at Ilke. Dallas twisted Ilke toward the rockets, and she fired to blow the rockets out of thin air.

The explosion pelted Dallas and Ilke into the wall behind Dallas, and Ilke ripped out of his grip. She whizzed into the path of Alice's guns.

Eckhart and Bing sprang out of their hiding places at the same time. Eckhart opened up with his guns and Bing hurled his Halfanite at Ilke, but her lasers protected her from everything.

A second later, Dallas hurtled into Ilke's sphere with his head down and his jet thrusters flaming at maximum. He collided with the sphere and an unholy shockwave of heat and billowing Datrium plastered Eckhart in the face. It flattened him onto the pavement and knocked the guns out of his hands.

He tipped onto his side, scrambling to reach them and clear the stars out of his head. He blinked and his stomach dropped when he saw Ilke getting to her feet not far away. Dallas lay still and inert next to her, but she paid no attention to him.

Bing and Alice struggled to right themselves and to aim their

weapons at her before she recovered. Eckhart crawled across the pavement and picked up his gun. It felt awfully small and useless against her.

Her dark eyes traced the intersection and fixed on Eckhart. Her expression darkened, and she set her face in a grim mask of hate. Alice picked up her pounder and the scratching sound drew Ilke's attention to Alice and Bing.

Alice straightened up and swung her pounder into position to threaten Ilke. Alice pulled out two more rockets, but Eckhart could already see from here that they were her last two. They couldn't defeat Ilke. Nothing could.

Eckhart braced himself to make his last stand. He, Alice, and Bing didn't stand a chance against Ilke, but maybe they didn't need to.

"Come back to the *Marathon* and give it up," he told her. "Even if you get away with this, the Bloody Blossoms are finished."

Ilke turned up her lips in a sadistic grin and laughed. "You think so? You aren't as smart as you think you are, Eckhart. Do you think you can get me back to the *Marathon* without this tin can?"

She kicked Dallas' leg, and his armor clunked on the pavement.

"I won," she gloated. "When are you gonna realize that? I lured Dallas out here and I defeated him. You don't have a weapon in your whole ship that can defeat me. Not even the *Marathon* itself can stop me." She laughed again. "You and your crew will never make it back to the fringes to tell the other aliens about the Bloody Blossoms. No one will stop our plan."

Eckhart shook his head. "You're forgetting one thing, Ilke."

"What's that, Eckhart? Are you going to whisper sweet nothings in my ear and convince me to turn myself in for your sake?"

"That wasn't exactly what I had in mind."

At that moment, something blurred above her head. Ilke was so busy rubbing his nose in his defeat that she didn't see it until it was too late. The next instant, it dropped on top of her and surrounded her.

She shrieked and all her tentacles snapped outward from her sides. Eckhart swept his gun to his shoulder in case she started shooting lasers again, but whatever it was surrounded her and froze her in mid-movement.

Eckhart stared at Ilke held in suspended animation as that weird gelatinous blur enveloped her. Ilke's limbs smeared in different

configurations and her face started to submerge into the combined murk of disintegration.

Her head contorted once and sank into the gooey indistinct marriage of reality and nothingness. She vanished into the substance, and Akkek's face emerged in Ilke's place. Akkek had her eyes closed again, but instead of grimacing and twisting in agony the way Ilke did, Akkek looked serene and asleep.

Her face rotated sideways with the slow-moving current of the disintegrated matter of their combined forms before Akkek submerged, too.

"Great!" Alice growled. "Now we have to carry these two back to the *Marathon*."

Eckhart knelt down next to Dallas and touched his friend's armor. "I'm more worried about Dallas. We have no way to bring him back without Akkek."

"We can't carry him, either," Bing added. "He's too damn heavy."

Eckhart stood up. "We don't have time for this. We need to get Ilke and Akkek back to the *Marathon* and then we need to get the ship repaired."

"Didn't Akkek's whole plan hinge on Dallas restraining Ilke while she disintegrated the ship through the EM field?" Bing asked. "How are we going to restrain Ilke without Dallas?"

Eckhart didn't answer. He didn't want to think about it. He glanced over at Akkek binding Ilke in a state of disintegration. Even the project of getting them back to the *Marathon* seemed too daunting right now. What was he supposed to do—carry them? He couldn't even find the *Marathon* again without either Dallas or Akkek showing him where it was.

In front of his eyes, the swirling mass of blurry reality congealed again and an arm extended from the center. It stretched a hand toward him and the fingers flexed in a beckoning motion, but at least it was a hand instead of one of Ilke's tentacles.

Eckhart reached out and clasped the hand. The moment he touched it, a charge of explosive power shot up his arm and blasted into his brain. "Holy shit!"

Bing grabbed him and yanked him away, but that instant of contact was all he needed.

"What happened?" Alice asked. "What did she do?"

Eckhart waved toward the combined mass of Akkek and Ilke.

“Pick it up.”

Bing made a face. “How? It’s not real.”

“Who cares how? Just pick it up. We have to get out of here. Hurry.”

Alice stepped forward, but she and Bing still refused to touch the thing. “What’s the problem? What did she tell you?”

Bing grimaced at the thing. “I’m not touching *that*.”

Eckhart shoved his guns into Bing’s hands. “Fine. I’ll carry it.”

He almost picked up the thing when Dallas bolted upright into a sitting position. “Reinitializing.”

Bing jumped a foot in the air. “Jesus Christ! You scared the shit out of me!”

Eckhart grabbed Dallas’ arm. “Get up, man. Hurry. We gotta get out of here.”

Dallas turned his helmet one way and then the other. “Ilke…”

“She’s been neutralized. You did great. I owe you a big one for this, but right now, we need you on your feet. Do you still have some Datrium left?”

Dallas inclined his helmet the other way. “Datrium at 57%.”

“Perfect. Come on. We got company and it’s gonna get messy.”

“What company?” Alice asked.

“How should I know? I don’t know anything about this damn planet. I only know what Akkek just told me.”

“What did she tell you?” Bing asked.

A low growl drifted from a nearby building and the whole crew stiffened. “What was that?” Alice husked through her mask.

“Go!” Eckhart ordered and pushed Dallas away. “Please, dear God, tell me the blast didn’t wipe your memory. Tell me you remember how to get back to the *Marathon*.”

“My memory is intact.”

Eckhart sprang for the blob, and but it was way too big to pick it up. The minute he touched it, it started to shrink until it was the size of a basketball. It squished and flexed in his hands, but at least he could carry it like this.

“Go! Lead us back to the *Marathon*…and you might want to extend your guns, pal. You’re gonna—”

A hideous yowl echoed out of the same building where they heard the growl. Eckhart hustled after Dallas to get out of this intersection, but when they emerged into a large two-way street, a creature Eckhart had never seen before vaulted out of the shadows.

It sailed toward Dallas and hovered there at the top of its arc. Eckhart caught a glimpse of something furry and quadrupedal. It cracked a mouthful of fangs and let out a screech that stood Eckhart's hair on end.

The creature sailed through space to pounce on Dallas, but Dallas whirled around and unleashed with his assault guns to shoot the creature down. Its body jerked and convulsed in midair before it slammed down in a pile of blood and gore.

Dallas stopped to stare down at the thing, but Eckhart shoved him from behind. "Keep moving! That was only the first one."

"How do you know?" Bing asked.

"Just keep—" Eckhart didn't get the words out before another of the same creature blasted out of a doorway on the other side of the street. It shrieked even louder and launched at Alice.

She spun around and fired one of her rockets at it. She had two left. The rocket punched the thing in the chest and ripped it backward. It smashed into a nearby wall and the body exploded into a million flying droplets.

That blast triggered a mass assault from all sides. More of the same species flooded out of corners and ruins. They dropped from paneless windows and roofs. They swarmed the streets, closing on the crew from all sides.

Dallas opened up with his assault guns and mowed them down by the hundreds, but more came out of nowhere.

"What is it with this planet?" Bing roared. "Can't they just have a normal population of anything instead of breeding millions of these things?"

Eckhart didn't answer. He pressed up behind Dallas. "Keep moving! We have to get back to the *Marathon*. Don't stop!"

Dallas extended both arms on either side of himself and sprayed his assault guns back and forth to carve a path through the tide of bodies. He didn't have to answer. Eckhart could already see the crew wasn't going to make it.

Bing covered one side of Eckhart with Eckhart's guns. Alice fired her last two rockets into the horde of creatures. The shots killed several, but more took their places.

Alice flipped her pounder around backward and used it to club the creatures away, but they overran the party in no time.

Bing backed into Eckhart and yelled over his shoulder. "I'm almost out! If we don't find some more Datrium pretty soon…"

Eckhart glanced over at Dallas. Dallas didn't respond. That couldn't be good. How much Datrium did Dallas still have? How soon would Dallas run out of fuel, too?

Eckhart didn't dare to ask Dallas how far away the *Marathon* was. How did he get stuck out here with no way to communicate with the ship?

"Can you contact the *Marathon* yet?" he yelled in Dallas' ear before he remembered. The *Marathon* was totally devoid of power.

"I couldn't reach the ship even if I was within range," Dallas called back.

"How far away are we?"

Dallas looked up. Eckhart followed his gaze and spotted the *Marathon*'s back end sticking out of a top story in the nearest skyscraper. The ship looked tiny from here. It was still way too far away.

Bing fired a few more times, and Eckhart heard his gun clunk. It was out of fuel.

Eckhart started to turn around when one of the aliens lifted off the ground with a blood-curdling scream, soared over the crowd, and landed right on top of Bing's head.

Eckhart and Dallas faced it to protect Bing, but Alice was too busy clubbing the creatures away on her side.

Eckhart tried to grab the thing, but the blob in his hands stuck to his fingers. He tugged, but he couldn't free them.

Dallas grabbed the monster, but it dug its claws into Bing's body and lunged its fangs toward his neck. Bing flailed trying to fight the thing off, and the whole group stumbled to a halt.

The moment they stopped walking, the aliens converged in droves. They sensed the party going down under their assault, and more of the things sprang in to drag the friends down.

Eckhart shook the blob, but it stuck fast. A lightning bolt of panic lit his brain on fire, and at that moment, the thing in his hands exploded outward with impossible force and speed. It burst to a ring of radiant light that enveloped the *Marathon* crew, and a thousand lasers erupted from its margins.

It surrounded the party in a split second, stripped the alien off Bing, and flung all the creatures clear. Outward-firing lasers formed a curtain of light and energy around the friends.

The whole thing happened so fast that Eckhart took an instant to realize he wasn't holding the blob anymore. He couldn't see Akkek

or Ilke anywhere. Only that bubble of energy bore witness that they were ever here.

The others looked around in confusion. The aliens kept trying to assault the bubble and break in. They charged into the margins and retreated with pained shrieks and snarls.

“Keep moving!” Eckhart ordered over the throbbing noise. “Get to the building!”

Dallas turned his back to Eckhart, but he still didn’t advance. Would they walk out of the ring of protection if they took a step forward?

Alice and Bing remained where they were. Alice brandished her pounder at the aliens, but they couldn’t break through.

Bing stared through the curtain at the aliens pacing back and forth just a few inches away. Their menacing eyes glared at the party. They licked their lips and bared their fangs.

Eckhart pulled himself together and grabbed Bing’s shoulder. He towed Alice and Bing forward and pushed Dallas to lead the way.

The bubble hovered around them, protecting them all the way. The party stumbled through one street after the other. Eckhart had no idea where they were going, and he didn’t care as long as Dallas did.

The aliens pressed against the bubble until Dallas finally stopped under the skyscraper with the *Marathon* sticking out of the upstairs window. The creatures paced, and some tried to break through only, to shrink back howling and whining.

Dallas pointed upward, but Eckhart couldn’t hear him over the noise. Eckhart couldn’t tell what Dallas wanted to do until Dallas hooked his mechanical arms around Alice and Bing.

He clutched them against his body and ignited his jet thrusters. He said something to Eckhart, but Eckhart couldn’t understand him. Dallas started to rise, and the bubble rose with him.

The aliens went wild when they saw their prey about to escape. They sprang at the bubble and fell away screaming. They pressed in tighter and tried to snap at the friends.

Eckhart threw caution to the wind and flung his arms around Dallas’ waist. He held on for dear life as Dallas lifted the rest of the way off the ground.

Eckhart’s legs dropped beneath the bubble’s lower margins and the aliens snapped at his heels. One of them caught his pants leg and almost yanked him off.

Eckhart retracted his legs, and Dallas heaved him out of the aliens' reach. The city dropped away and the wind picked up as Dallas left more and more stories behind.

Eckhart's arms ached, but he held on. He only had to open his eyes to see how high he was. If he let go now, he would be dead.

He decided to keep them closed. He concentrated all his effort on holding onto Dallas until Dallas carried the three friends into the cargo hold and set them down next to the Crick centrifuge.

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7

Eckhart collapsed on the floor to catch his breath. His arms and fingers trembled from holding onto Dallas so tightly.

Dallas released Bing and Alice and all four friends watched the pulsating ball of laser light transform back into an indistinct blob of smeared matter.

The blob undulated and blooped across the floor. It blurred through the wall and disappeared inside the Crick centrifuge.

"This is bad news," Dallas muttered.

"Why is it bad news?" Alice snarled. "We don't have to deal with that witch shooting up the city anymore and sending a bunch of pint-sized aliens after us. She's safe."

"How are we going to repair the ship and leave orbit without Akkek?"

Alice started to say something and stopped herself. Eckhart read the same thought going through her and Bing's minds. All four of them were thinking the same thing.

This whole plan depended on Dallas being able to restrain Ilke while Akkek helped reintegrate the hull and disintegrate the ship through the EM field.

What if he failed—or worse? What if he lost control of Ilke while the *Marathon* was soaring through the damn atmosphere? The ship might end up in exactly the same situation or a much worse one. It might crash and burn with everyone on board.

"Let's get the ship repaired first." Eckhart got to his feet and drew in a shaky breath. "Let's get to the bridge and find out how Rixby is getting along with the Sorix."

"She's probably planning to join them," Alice snarled.

"They're probably positioning her to take over as their glorious leader," Bing joined in.

Eckhart went over to the Crick centrifuge just to make sure Akkek and Ilke were back in their old place. He couldn't help but feel grateful to Akkek for neutralizing Ilke, but at the same time, he suffered a pang of annoyance that these two were taking up residence in his Crick centrifuge. He wouldn't be sorry to get both of them off his ship for good…whenever that turned out to be.

He headed for the stairs and went up to the bridge. He stopped dead on the threshold and stared at hundreds, if not thousands, of Sorix covering the hull breach.

He couldn't see exactly what they were doing. Too many of them crawled over each other and stood on each other's heads.

Flashes of light blinked in the throng. It reminded him of welding arcs, but it couldn't be. He couldn't see that any of the Sorix was using any equipment.

He blundered over to Rixby's workstation which, by some miracle, had been reconstructed. She stood on it and tapped the controls the way she usually did.

"Rixby…"

She was so excited by her controls that she barely looked at him. "Akkek and Ilke are back in the centrifuge, I see. Could you tell Dallas to connect himself to the ship's diagnostics? His operating system is showing some anomalous readings."

"Rixby," Eckhart stammered. "What the hell are they doing to the ship?"

"They're fixing it. They want to express their gratitude for us getting rid of Ilke."

"But…how do they know how to fix the ship? They're, I mean __"

"I don't know how they're doing it, but they're doing a really good job. Don't worry. I'm keeping track of everything through the ship's sensors. If they ever do anything wrong, I correct them and they change it. They're very apologetic."

"How are they doing this? They don't have any tools or equipment."

"I'm not sure. I don't understand it, but if I had to guess, I'd say they've been working with the ruins of this city for a while. They seem to be experts at metal and stonework." She cocked her head. "Are you okay, Eckhart?"

He blinked at the Sorix and then at her. "Huh?"

"Why don't you take a break? Everything is under control here."

He stared down at her. She waved her antennae at him, and he realized. How long had it been since he'd sat down, or slept? He couldn't really remember. So many crazy things had been happening one after another. He didn't seem to be able to stop.

She turned back to her controls. "Go sit down somewhere. I'll let you know if anything happens."

He watched the Sorix for a while. He didn't want to leave. He wanted to stick around and make sure the Sorix didn't mess up his ship.

Eckhart had been solely responsible for repairing the *Marathon* for years. He didn't want some random aliens on an unknown planet doing it for him, but Rixby was right. She could monitor the Sorix better than he could.

He didn't doubt that she would alert him if anything happened. He had no reason to stay.

He wobbled on his heels and felt the exhaustion of the last few days catching up with him. He hadn't slept or taken a moment off since he'd flown back to Parilia.

He stumbled over to the door and hesitated again. He glanced back, but Rixby didn't look up from her work. She didn't need him. The ship didn't need him.

Akkek and Ilke were safe inside the Crick centrifuge. Eckhart didn't need to worry about any of it until it came time to leave orbit.

He lurched onto the gangway and heard Alice and Dallas talking in the galley. He heard Dallas laughing, and Eckhart directed his steps that way.

Alice sat at the table while Dallas stood by the nutrient aperture. It connected to his arm port and a bunch of wires ran out of a different access panel to a connection unit on the side of his helmet. He was already running his operating system through the ship's diagnostics, so he didn't need Eckhart to tell him to do it.

Neither Dallas nor Alice noticed Eckhart standing outside the door. They didn't need him, either. What possible reason could he have to stay on his feet?

He headed for his quarters and happened to glance into the infirmary on his way past it. Innyria lay on one of the exam tables. He curled up on his side and he had his eyes closed while Bing worked over him.

Eckhart advanced into the room. "Is he all right?"

"He's fine. He's asleep. He's tired after getting reintegrated from that shard penetrating his chest. He needs rest."

Eckhart nodded, too numb with fatigue to form words. Innyria didn't ask for this. He should go back to Parilia. Eckhart just didn't see any way he could do that.

Eckhart blundered out of the infirmary. Now that he'd actually

considered sitting down and taking a load off his legs, he started to crumble. He needed to shut down for several hours, or maybe days.

He went to his quarters and sat down on his bunk. As soon as he did that, he started shaking much worse. None of his muscles had even a trace of energy left in them.

He turned to lie down when a figure blocked his door. He looked up to see Bing walk in without waiting to be invited. Bing shut the door behind him and stared down into Eckhart's eyes.

"What's up, pal?" Eckhart asked. "Is Innyria okay?"

"He's fine." Bing nodded down at Eckhart's body. "Take your shirt off."

"What?" Eckhart asked. "What do you mean?"

Bing didn't move. He stood over Eckhart, and Eckhart's nerves prickled. Bing never acted this way except when he was getting ready to fight an enemy. "I said take your shirt off, Eckhart."

"Why?" Eckhart asked. He didn't want to know. Was Bing about to attack him?

Bing lowered his voice to a whisper even though no one else could hear him. "I haven't had a chance to check you out since we stole you back from Vora."

"I'm okay. I'm just tired. I need to sleep."

"Take your shirt off, Eckhart," Bing ordered. "Don't make me have to do it for you."

Eckhart stared up at his friend and stiffened. What was Bing about to do to him?

All at once, Eckhart couldn't resist anymore. He heaved to his feet and started unbuttoning his shirt. He peeled it off…and felt it. Only after all the adrenaline died did he feel the pain of a thousand cuts.

He dropped his shirt on the bed, but he couldn't meet Bing's gaze. Eckhart gulped, feeling Bing examine his torso.

Dozens of razor slashes crisscrossed Eckhart's chest, arms, stomach, and back. They snaked up his neck, and the sting of the Onzai's venom still tormented his skin where Vora's torturer had cut him.

Bing stepped forward and started probing at the angry weeping scabs. Some of the older ones that the Onzai had inflicted on Parilia had healed into scars under Bing's treatment on Vora's freighter.

The more recent ones had stuck to Eckhart's shirt, and they broke open when he took the shirt off. They hurt almost as much

now as they had when the Onzai's poison first burned into his flesh.

He kept his eyes down while Bing examined him. "We need to treat these. Some of them are already infected."

Eckhart didn't answer. He didn't want to acknowledge to his friend how much the cuts hurt—and not just on the outside.

Bing straightened up. "Open your mouth."

Eckhart shut his eyes and opened his mouth. Bing spat a dose of Eplite onto his tongue and Eckhart swallowed it.

"Stay here," Bing ordered.

Eckhart wasn't about to go anywhere. He was glad Bing shut the door before he started this business. Eckhart didn't want any of the rest of the crew to see this. He didn't want them to see him injured—or worse. What if he was permanently damaged—or permanently weakened?

Bing left and came back with some of his medical equipment. He set his tools on Eckhart's table and started working on Eckhart's many cuts.

He sprayed analgesic on them first and then started scraping the encrusted scabs away. They burned even worse, but the Eplite started to spread its soothing effects through Eckhart's mind and body.

Bing worked over him for a long time. Blood ran down Eckhart's chest and back. Bing mopped it up, and when he finally cleaned all the wounds, he sprayed more analgesic and spread several doses of Eplite on them.

Bing stepped back, and Eckhart met his eye for the first time. Bing measured him with a strange expression. Bing didn't usually go more than a few minutes without making some ridiculous joke, but he didn't speak through the whole procedure.

Bing held out a piece of fabric. "Put this on under your shirt. It will protect the wounds and keep them clean. Put a new one on under your clothes until the cuts heal."

Eckhart nodded and pulled the protective sleeve over his head. He positioned it over his chest, arms, and stomach before he got a clean shirt out from under his bed. He put that on over the sleeve. He felt more human like this. He didn't realize that his regular shirt was making his cuts worse.

"Sit down," Bing told him.

Eckhart sat down on his bed in a trance. He couldn't think of anything worse than this. Now he really wanted to fall unconscious

and stop thinking about everything.

Bing didn't leave, though. He sat down next to Eckhart. "So."

"What?" Eckhart muttered.

"You need to talk about it. It's bothering you."

Eckhart snorted. "Of course it's bothering me. Some lunatic alien kidnapped me, tortured me, and almost killed me."

"I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about Vora."

"Isn't that what I'm talking about?"

"No. The other part."

Eckhart couldn't look up. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Do you want to talk to someone else—Dallas, maybe?"

"No."

"I'm the medic on this ship," Bing told him. "It's my job to heal all the injuries on this crew. That's what you told me when you first took me on."

"You already did that, so you can go. I don't want to talk about it."

Bing didn't move. "You know, Eckhart, sometimes I fool myself into thinking we might actually be friends after all the crazy shit we've been through."

Eckhart's head shot up before he thought to stop himself. "We *are* friends."

"Then you better talk to me. What happened on Parilia?"

Eckhart lowered his gaze to the floor. In a flash, his strength died again. He couldn't fight anymore, not even against this. "I saw…someone."

"Who?"

"Someone who used to mean a lot to me. Someone I used to think might be family—the only family I ever had. I left him behind…again. I left him for twenty years…and now I left him behind for the second time. He's still back there. He's on Parilia and he's all alone...and I'm here."

"Did he want you to stay?"

"No. He never knew I ever left."

"Why didn't you bring him with you?"

Eckhart didn't answer that question. There was no answer. He never once considered taking Dichi off Parilia, and he couldn't have taken Dichi even if he wanted to. Eckhart had left Parilia as Vora's captive. He probably did Dichi a massive favor by leaving him where he was.

“What about Vora?” Bing asked.

“She’s dead.”

“Yeah. Did she say anything to you while you were with her?”

“No.”

Bing didn’t speak. That silence went on and on without end. It weighed more heavily on Eckhart’s conscience than anything Bing said out loud.

How could he tell anyone what happened between himself and Vora when nothing happened? Bing already knew the worst of what Vora did to Eckhart.

Bing had to know if he kept sitting here like this. He must sense that the Onzai’s poison had left some trace of something a lot worse in Eckhart’s body. It poisoned his very soul, and he didn’t feel it until right now.

That poison wouldn’t stay inside anymore. It forced its way to the surface just like the blood and pus oozing from his cuts. “You should have left me there. You should have let her kill me.”

Bing raised one of his many limbs and gripped Eckhart’s shoulder, but he still didn’t say anything.

Once Eckhart started talking, he couldn’t hold it back. He wanted to puke the words out and purge himself of their toxic disgusting poison. “You shouldn’t have let me come back like this. You shouldn’t have brought me back in pieces. Death would be better than this.”

“You’re worth too much to us,” Bing murmured in his ear. “You’re worth more in pieces than you are whole.”

Eckhart shook his head. He didn’t want to be alive feeling this way. He didn’t want to be as injured on the inside as he was on the outside.

He wished like hell that Vora had killed him. Vora was dead and wouldn’t bother him again, but not even knowing that could heal this hurt inside him.

His body screamed in pain, but that was nothing compared to this black despair threatening to overwhelm him. He didn’t want to come back from this. He wanted to die rather than face another day with these scars.

Bing stood up and faced him. “Open your mouth, Eckhart.”

Eckhart opened his mouth and Bing gave him another dose of Eplite.

Bing pushed him down on the bed. “Lie down.”

Eckhart eased over on his side. The Eplite spread through him and, to his amazement, it started to ease the anguish in his heart even more than the pain in his skin.

Bing guided him down on the pillow and Eckhart shut his eyes. He already felt better. His friends stood guard over him. They waited for him to heal. They would be there waiting when he regained his strength, and in that moment, he understood what Bing meant.

They didn't want him whole. They didn't need him whole. They needed a man, not a machine. Not even Dallas was totally invincible.

All these people knew about his ordeal with Vora. They might not know how close he came to wishing he was dead. They might not know just how many times in Vora's custody he wished she would carry out her threat and kill him, but she never did. She always sent him back to Bing to heal his injuries so she could do it all again.

The *Marathon* crew might not know that much. Then again, they might know, and they still wanted him. They didn't think he was too weak to lead them. They'd risked everything to find him and get him away from Vora.

Bing wouldn't tell them about Eckhart's injuries. He wouldn't tell them about Eckhart's confession, either, but even if they found out, they wouldn't care. Dallas. Rixby. Alice. Bing. Each of them cared about him.

Any one of them might have come into his quarters and talked to him about what happened. It just turned out to be Bing.

Even Innyria and Akkek might have cared enough to do that.

Eckhart knew Innyria cared enough to do it. Eckhart and Innyria had backed each other up on Parilia when they were young…and Akkek would have helped Eckhart, too. He knew that.

He didn't have to hide it from them. He didn't have to pretend to be better than he was. He was the only Earthling on this crew, and they all understood the Earthlings' weaknesses.

Bing shut the door, and silence fell over Eckhart's quarters. His eyes drifted closed and he felt himself drifting away, not just from the *Marathon*, but from the past, too. It got more and more hazy until he could hardly remember, and he fell asleep.

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8

Eckhart woke to a low rumble shuddering through the *Marathon*. He jolted out of a sound sleep and raised his head to listen. He knew every sound on this ship, but he didn't recognize this one.

His mind searched the ship. He was on Sorix. The ship was destroyed…except that those little monsters were working on it without him.

He sat up and stuck his feet into his boots. He shouldn't have slept so long. He shouldn't have slept at all while the Sorix were working on his ship. He shouldn't have trusted Rixby to supervise them. God only knew what the Sorix were doing while his back was turned.

He stormed out of his quarters and almost toppled as the ship gave a violent lurch. The vibrations coming through the walls and floor grew louder until the whole ship groaned.

He exploded onto the bridge. "What the hell is going on?"

"We're launching!" Alice called from her station.

"No! You can't!" Eckhart lunged for his chair and staggered as the ship spasmed and clanged hard to port.

"Do you think I can stop it?" she yelled over her shoulder. "That filthy bitch is launching whether we like it or not."

"We've got no Datrium, no Celdian—we've got nothing!" Rixby squeaked. "Nothing at all!"

Eckhart sprang into his chair and immediately saw that Alice was right. His regulators activated themselves before he could even touch them. Akkek had taken control of the ship. The regulators showed a residual trickle of Datrium keeping the ship powered up, but it could never be enough to run the engines, much less the ship's guns.

"We can't launch now!" he yelled over another deafening bang. "If we leave orbit, the first ship to attack us will wipe us out."

"Tell her that," Alice snarled. "She's closing the ramp and sealing the life support system. Dallas, Bing, and Innyria are in the lounge strapping in."

Eckhart swallowed hard as the tactical grid snapped on without him doing anything. It showed the ship slipping out of the building

into thin air.

The dark bridge wall beyond the grid should have made him feel better. The Sorix had repaired the hull breach, but that only made him feel worse. None of the other ship's systems were fully operational.

The ship creaked and screeched against the floor. More debris, broken concrete, and glass shards rained around it as the *Marathon* skidded backward into open space.

A bright rim of light and energy flared around the ship as it hovered thousands of feet above the ground. The *Marathon* turned backward and started to rise.

"How is she doing this?" Eckhart rasped.

"She's disintegrating the ship and melding the *Marathon* with Ilke," Rixby peeped. "She's using Ilke's lasers to form a barrier around the ship."

"Does that mean she'll be able to use Ilke's lasers against anyone who attacks us?"

Both Alice and Rixby turned around to glance at him, but they didn't answer. The ship gained altitude all the time.

"Can we withstand leaving orbit?"

"Not under normal conditions," Rixby replied, "but with Akkek flying the ship, who knows?"

"We're nearing the EM field," Alice reported. "Holy flying shit! There are seventeen attack vessels waiting for us."

"Who are they?"

"I can't tell through the field. We'll be breaking through in five minutes."

"Can we reroute the Datrium through the weapons system? Isn't there any other way we can defend ourselves?"

"Who the hell knows? Ask her."

Eckhart stared into the tactical grid. The ship floated closer to the EM field. The grid showed the enemy ships from here, but he couldn't recognize them...until the *Marathon* got closer.

The grid blinked to identify them the instant Alice reported the readings. "They're Lion Tribe! They must have followed us."

Eckhart shot out of his chair and charged off the bridge. He couldn't let the *Marathon* go out there some way to defend itself.

He raced downstairs and pulled up in front of the Crick centrifuge. He didn't know if this would work, but he had to try.

The mass of whatever it was still undulated and wavered where

the centrifuge ought to be. He summoned all his resolve, shut his eyes, and thrust his hand into the indistinct blurry mass.

Akkek and Ilke both flashed into his mind. Akkek stood still and gazed up at him with an inquisitive look in her eyes while Ilke contorted and twisted and spasmed in several directions at once. She didn't make any sound. Her face and body kept smearing, wavering, and reforming in unnatural shapes.

Eckhart tried to speak, but he couldn't make a sound. He kept trying to make himself understood to Akkek, but she showed no sign of being able to understand him.

He started to despair when he got a powerful sense that she understood, and in a split second, he found himself standing back in the cargo hold. The noise echoing through the ship changed, and he heard the telltale whine of the engines kicking to life.

He vaulted up the stairs and leapt into his seat. "What did you do?" Rixby asked. "We have a full complement of Datrium and Celdian now."

"Akkek reintegrated them. She reproduced the reserves we already had, which means we won't run out. We're getting the hell out of here."

He grabbed the regulators and slammed down the throttle. He punched through the EM field and picked up speed on a collision course for the Lion Tribe ships lurking in orbit.

The regulators wavered for an instant when he crossed the field. They instantly reasserted themselves and the engines howled through the hull.

"Weapons systems are activating themselves," Rixby reported. "Akkek is bringing them back online."

"Don't tell me she plans to man them for us," Alice snarled. "I'll kill her!"

"No!" Eckhart tightened his grip on the regulators. "This one is all ours."

"The Lion Tribe is turning!" Rixby squealed. "You better be ready to…"

Eckhart didn't get off a shot before Akkek opened fire. The bright ring surrounding the *Marathon* exploded in a thousand laser shots that caught the approaching Lion Tribe completely off guard.

Lasers sprayed from the ring as Eckhart plunged nose-first into the enemy. He slammed his own guns to port and plastered seven ships with plasma while Akkek cut down those closing from

starboard.

"They're following you!" Rixby screamed. "They're coming about for a rear assault!"

"Yeah!" Alice roared. "That's what I'm talking about. We should fight this way all the time."

Eckhart barely heard her. He brought his guns around to face front and came nose to nose with ten more ships rushing him at full speed. He unleashed as much Datrium as he could, but the Lion Tribe would still have cut the *Marathon* in half if Akkek wasn't helping out.

Lasers spouted from the starboard side and blasted from the front at the same time. She hit two ships that exploded in the *Marathon*'s path, but more stood in the ship's way.

Eckhart hauled back on the throttle, but the ship didn't slow down. He fought the regulators, but he had no control of the ship.

"Break off!" Rixby shrieked. "Divert!"

"I'm trying!" Eckhart bellowed. "She's overriding the helm!"

Alice yelled something else and Eckhart braced himself for impact, but the next minute, the Lion Tribe attackers hit Ilke's ring. Akkek drove the *Marathon* straight into them and they detonated in deafening explosions.

The *Marathon* plowed through the flames and kept on going, with the rest of the enemy hot on the ship's tail. Eckhart swung his guns backward and the tactical grid followed him to show the Lion Tribe closing the gap.

The enemy bombarded the *Marathon* with countless pounding shots, but they hit the laser ring and didn't touch the hull. Did Eckhart dare to hope the *Marathon* might get away from them?

He sprayed shots at the enemy, but the Datrium didn't do nearly as much good as Ilke's lasers. They surrounded the *Marathon* in a blazing shield, cutting down everything that came near it. They formed a halo of brilliance holding the Lion Tribe at bay.

"Heads up!" Alice called. "We got company!"

"Not now!" Eckhart yelled back.

"Look!" she demanded, and he glanced over his shoulder.

He momentarily forgot to shoot when another fleet of ships moved in from the Izapus Ring around the Dothea sun, but these weren't more Lion Tribe ships. Eckhart could almost wish they were.

He didn't recognize these newcomers, and when they appeared

on the tactical grid, the system failed to identify them. They dwarfed the Lion Tribe ships by many times. The strangers loomed huge and threatening over the battle.

The Lion Tribe fell back to put some distance between themselves and the newcomers. Eckhart tried to do the same thing, but Akkek took over again. The engines roared even higher no matter how hard he tried to pull back on the throttle.

The Lion Tribe cut their fire and all of Ilke's lasers rotated to the front. Akkek concentrated her whole attack on the strange battlecruisers hurtling into view, but nothing touched them.

Her lasers bounced off their hulls and Eckhart snapped out of his trance. He rotated the *Marathon*'s guns forward and added his plasma to her lasers. He tried to focus on the same places she hit, but she didn't make it easy with so many blasts deflecting off their giant sides.

She steered the *Marathon* toward one of the smallest battlecruisers—not that it would make much difference. Her lasers cut off, and more energy flared in the ring surrounding the ship.

"Make her stop!" Rixby shrieked. "They have— "

She didn't get the words out before the *Marathon* broke through the oncoming flank. Akkek steered the ship next to the small battlecruiser's hull. She must have been trying to sneak through their ranks, but the instant Ilke's ring touched the cruiser's hull, a shockwave went through the ship.

The tactical grid blinked once and flickered off. The bridge went dark except for the light coming from Alice's station, Rixby's controls, and Eckhart's regulators.

"What the hell happened?" Alice asked.

"I tried to tell you!" Rixby cried. "They have Triorium drive."

Eckhart froze. "Triorium drive! Only the Jackal Clan has that. What are they doing here?"

"They aren't Jackal Clan."

"Well, who are they?"

"I don't know!" she screeched. "The Triorium drive did something to Akkek. She's…she isn't working anymore."

"What—not at all?" Alice rasped.

"Ilke's lasers are down and the ship is losing integration." Rixby went into another scurrying dance on her controls. "We're running out of Datrium…and we have no Celdian."

A low boom shook the *Marathon*, and Eckhart attacked his

regulators. “We’re losing hull integrity! We’re sitting ducks.”

“Here comes the Lion Tribe!” Alice yelled.

Eckhart tightened his grip on the regulators as the Lion Tribe rushed the stricken *Marathon* for another brutal assault, but when he tried to shoot, nothing happened.

The enemy opened fire and lambasted the hull with crushing shots. The *Marathon* jerked sideways and started to list.

“The Celdian is gone!” Alice blared. “The Crick centrifuge is starting to collapse.”

“Alert Dallas!” Eckhart ordered. “Tell him to channel whatever Datrium he has left back into the reserves.”

“Internal communication is down!” Rixby squeaked. “I can’t contact him. His helmet is disconnected from the ship.”

Another punishing barrage smacked the *Marathon* back to starboard and Eckhart fell hard against his regulators. He scrambled to find some control he could use against the impending disaster.

The Lion Tribe whizzed around the *Marathon* to surround it. The enemy ships turned their weapons inward to finish off the ship when, without warning, the biggest battlecruiser unleased a cruel volley of rockets and plasma from the ports along its underside.

The barrage wheeled into the assembled Lion Tribe, and four ships detonated in close range to the *Marathon*. The blast caught the *Marathon* and hurled it hard to port. It slammed into another Lion Tribe vessel and the Lion Tribe vessel exploded.

A wave of darkness swept across the bridge. It consumed Alice’s station and crawled toward Eckhart’s chair. “We’re losing all power!” Rixby screamed. “If the systems completely shut down, the ship will depressurize.”

“What’s going on with Akkek?” Eckhart yelled back. “Is she doing anything?”

Rixby glanced up at him, and he saw the answer in her eyes. She didn’t have to say anything.

That terrible darkness shivered over his chair and took out one of his regulators. The other one still worked, but only to show him everything about the *Marathon* that wasn’t working.

“The battlecruisers are opening fire again!” Rixby shrieked. “They’re targeting us!”

A monstrous wave of plasma billowed from the largest ship. That treacherous lick of power surrounded the *Marathon*, but for some reason, it didn’t destroy the ship.

The remaining Lion Tribe vessels spun around to attack the strange battlecruisers, but the cruisers only turned their weapons on the Lion Tribe. The whole armada opened fire and popped the Lion Tribe ships one after the other.

Continuous blasts rocked the *Marathon*, but Eckhart couldn't do anything about that. No one could do anything about it. He, Alice, and Rixby watched in horror as those mysterious behemoths destroyed the Lion Tribe fleet one ship at a time.

"They're bringing us in!" Rixby squeaked. "They're pulling us inside their hull."

Eckhart got to his feet and stumbled over to her workstation. No other instruments on the bridge worked anymore.

He watched with his heart in his mouth as a giant hatch opened in the largest ship's side. The plume of plasma surrounding the *Marathon* towed the ship inside the alien vessel's hull and the hatch boomed closed behind it.

Darkness consumed the bridge and Rixby gave one last pathetic squeak. "We're losing power. We're finished."

Eckhart straightened up with an effort. He had to do something. He should at least go downstairs and make sure the others were okay, but he couldn't move. He had no idea who these aliens were, but they couldn't mean him and his crew any good.

Now the *Marathon* crew were captives on this ship with no way out. The *Marathon* was inoperable and might stay that way forever. No Sorix would come along to fix the ship now, which meant Eckhart and his crew had no way to escape.

He raised his hand and laid it on Rixby's furry head. "It's all right," he whispered. "We'll get out of here. We always do."

He didn't know how he would fulfill that promise, but he had to say something. He heaved an almighty sigh. This was not the way he wanted to wake up in the morning.

His mind went to the door leading to the gangway. He'd have to pry it open just to get off the bridge, but it was a start. He would work out the rest later…sometime.

Alice got to her feet when Rixby's workstation flashed on. She jumped and squeaked in surprise as all her controls lit up beneath her feet.

She started scrambling around on them, beeping and chirping like anything, when a screen flickered on to her right. A familiar face appeared and two black, hollow, eyeless sockets stared at

Eckhart from above a tight-fitting gas mask.

"Are you still flying that wreck, Eckhart? When are you going to stop being so stingy and buy yourself a new ship?"

Eckhart almost collapsed in relief. He propped his arms on Rixby's workstation and let out a shaky breath. "Squids! I thought you were dead."

"Sadly, no," Squids husked. "We are very much alive, luckily for you. Your electrical system is in a wretched state as usual."

"Tell me about it." Eckhart frowned. "We? Who's we? Aistenz… he isn't…"

"Aistenz is here and he's requesting to see you, as soon as you can get yourself out of that crate."

Eckhart tried to laugh and found himself shaking again. "Where did you get these battlecruisers?"

"You don't want to ask that. I'll meet you at the ramp. And Eckhart?"

"Yeah?"

"Bring Akkek Stratha with you. Aistenz wants you to turn her over to him now—no excuses."

"You got it."

The screen flicked off, but only Rixby's workstation and Eckhart's starboard regulator kept power. The rest of the bridge and Alice's station remained dark.

Alice strode over to Eckhart. "Let's get that bitch off our ship… and don't ever let her on it again, Eckhart. I mean it."

"I don't plan to. Come on. I want to see Aistenz."

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9

Eckhart was right. He had to pry the bridge door open. Even with Alice lending her great strength to the operation, he probably never would have gotten off the *Marathon* if Dallas hadn't shown up.

He extended a buzz saw from one of his prosthetics and carved the door off its hinges to let Eckhart, Rixby, and Alice out.

"Is anyone hurt?" Bing asked when the crew rejoined on the gangway.

"Only if you count the *Marathon*," Alice told him.

"That's an improvement," he replied. "I thought you were all dead."

"You hoped we were," Alice corrected. "You hoped you could steal all our food before Eckhart hired another crew."

Bing laughed. "Great idea. Why didn't I think of that?"

"Have any of you been downstairs to check on our passengers?" Eckhart asked.

"No," Dallas replied. "We heard you banging on the door and we came up here."

"At least Ilke won't be able to get away from us here," Bing added.

"Where are we, anyway?" Innyria asked.

"We're on Aistenz Trotaer's ship," Eckhart replied. "He saved us from the Lion Tribe."

Innyria paled. "We can't be. Do you know how dangerous he is?"

"He's dangerous to the Lion Tribe," Alice growled. "He isn't dangerous to Eckhart."

"He will be if we don't turn over Akkek. Let's go downstairs and see what the situation is."

They went down to the cargo hold, but when Eckhart approached the stairs, Innyria caught Eckhart's elbow. He pulled Eckhart behind the others and let the rest of the crew go ahead. "We aren't really on Aistenz Trotaer's ship, are we?"

"Yes, we are, but don't worry. He's my friend…or friendly, rather."

Innyria hung back. "I don't think I should go out there."

“Why not? He won’t do anything to you. You’re with me.” Eckhart scowled at his friend. “Is there something you aren’t telling me? Does Aistenz have any reason not to like you?”

“No. It’s just…I’ve been working with the Chosen and the Immortals all these years. He’s likely to do anything once he realizes who I am.”

Eckhart clapped him on the shoulder. “You aren’t with the Chosen or the Immortals. You’ve only been cooperating with them so you could survive on Parilia. Aistenz understands about that. Trust me. Besides, if he takes issue with you, I’ll just explain that you helped me get away from Vora.”

“I guess so.”

“We’re friends. We were friends before I ever met Aistenz. Don’t worry. Aistenz owes me, and you’re a part of my crew now. He won’t do anything to you. Trust me.”

“Okay. I trust you.” Innyria glanced up at him. “You’re different, Eckhart. You’re different from the way you used to be.”

“You mean I’m different from the way I was when I was seventeen? Yes, I am, and so are you. Now come on.”

He trotted downstairs and nearly had a heart attack when he discovered Akkek and Ilke standing in the middle of the cargo hold. They weren’t integrated anymore. They both looked totally normal.

Bing and Alice were talking to Akkek to one side while Dallas and Ilke stood together a few yards away. Ilke smiled up at Dallas and they conversed in low tones. Eckhart couldn’t hear what they were saying.

Eckhart made a snap decision and went over to Akkek. “What’s going on? Why did you release her?”

“The Triorium drive threw us out of integration. I had to let her go, but don’t worry. She can’t get out of the ship.”

“Are you sure she won’t start blasting?”

Akkek nodded. “Did you see the way her lasers deflected off the hull? She’s powerless in here. Is it true Aistenz is still alive?”

“That’s what Squids says. Let’s go see what they want to do.”

He approached the ramp, and when he checked the controls, they had enough power for him to open it.

It clanged hard on a thick steel floor. Alice pulled out a sidearm when she approached it, but Eckhart pushed her arm down. “Don’t. We’re among friends here.”

“*You* are,” she snarled. “Aistenz Trotaer will never be my

friend."

"Then at least don't threaten him until you're sure he plans to hurt you first."

She made a threatening hiss through her mask, and Eckhart turned away. He was too grateful to be back on any ship belonging to Aistenz.

He walked down the ramp to see Squids coming to meet him. The Bion held out his long arms. "Eckhart! We thought we lost you on Sorix."

"And we thought we lost you on Pheste. What happened to you?"

"You'll see. Everything isn't all roses in paradise, unfortunately, but Aistenz survived." Squids glanced behind Eckhart's back. "I wonder, Eckhart…could we borrow your Yakit? We'll pay you for him, of course."

"What do you need him for? I won't part with him unless he really wants to go."

Squids waved behind him. "Come with me and I'll show you."

Squids led the way across a massive landing platform that towered high above the ruined *Marathon*. Dozens of other ships stood on the deck with mechanics working on them, but the mechanics didn't come near the *Marathon*. It must be too damaged ever to fly again.

Eckhart went back inside the cargo hold and surveyed his friends. Innyria wouldn't want to leave the *Marathon*. Seeing Aistenz Trotaer in the flesh would probably give Innyria a heart attack, and Alice hated Aistenz.

Eckhart didn't want to leave Ilke unguarded, so he sauntered over to Dallas. "Hold the fort here until I get back."

Dallas nodded. "You bet."

Eckhart heard what Dallas didn't say. Dallas might be having a nice, civil conversation with Ilke right now, but he wouldn't let his guard down around her. Eckhart couldn't think of anyone besides Akkek he'd rather leave to watch Ilke.

He motioned Akkek and Bing forward. "You two come with me."

Akkek followed him without any argument, and they caught up with Squids in front of an internal lift that whisked them up and up and up to the very top of the battlecruiser.

The party emerged on a wide deck. Sky-high windows gave a complete circular view of the stars surrounding the battlecruiser

fleet that had saved the *Marathon*. They hadn't moved since they ended the battle against the Lion Tribe.

Eckhart resisted the urge to ask again where Aistenz got these ships. Aistenz was capable of anything, and Eckhart didn't want to know that badly.

Squids escorted the group down a long walkway with no walls. "The Lion Tribe knows about you now, Eckhart. They know you killed Zels Ariat."

"I know that."

"They'll come after you," Squids went on. "Aistenz is prepared to offer you his protection."

Eckhart cocked his head to study the old Bion. "Are you sure that's a good idea? A full galactic war between Aistenz's empire and the Lion Tribe…that could get ugly."

"Aistenz protects his own. You carried out the hit for Aistenz, and you have kept his anonymity all these years. You are in this danger now because you were prepared to die to keep his secret. Aistenz remembers, and he's very grateful. He wants to protect you and your crew from the Lion Tribe."

"That's very admirable, but it isn't necessary. I was protecting myself as much as Aistenz by keeping the secret. I don't expect Aistenz to risk his fortune for me."

"What will you do if he doesn't?" Squids asked. "Will you go on the run—you and your crew? You might want to ask your friends if they agree with that plan."

Eckhart didn't answer. He didn't have to wonder what the rest of the *Marathon* crew would do. They'd go with him—no question. Only Innyria would leave. He'd go back to his safe little office on Parilia, and Eckhart didn't blame him.

"Wait until you hear what Aistenz has to say before you decide," Squids went on. "The Lion Tribe will start this war with you or without you. You don't have to run and hide anymore, Eckhart. You can accept Aistenz's protection. He thinks very highly of you, you know."

Eckhart didn't answer that, either. He knew Aistenz Trotaer thought highly of him.

Squids halted at a wall on the far side of the gallery. This section alone interrupted the view of space outside.

Squids did something to a security panel by the door, and it slid open. Eckhart, Akkek, and Bing stepped into an opulent bedroom

with a giant platform along one half of the room.

Satin mattresses and dozens of pillows covered it. A golden chain ran from a spiral pillar to an alien hovering on shimmering wings several feet above the floor.

The creature fluttered back and forth on the end of its chain, but its wings stuttered and faltered. The rim of one wing had been torn into a ragged fringe, and the top half of the other wing was missing entirely.

Aistenz had to flap harder to keep himself aloft, and scorch marks dotted his abdomen. Some of his limbs were gone and one of his large compound globe eyes had turned grey and crusty.

"Can you do anything for him?" Eckhart whispered to Bing. "Is he too far gone?"

"I'm not sure if Eplite can fix this," Bing replied. "I don't understand their physiology. It might be too late."

"Eckhart!" Aistenz rasped as soon as they walked in. "You're alive! I was so worried about you."

Eckhart advanced into the room. "I thought you were dead. I'm sorry about the—"

Aistenz waved that away and beat his wings in an annoyed buzz. "That doesn't matter. We need to prepare our offensive against the Lion Tribe."

Squids hurried forward and stepped between Aistenz and Eckhart. "Eckhart has a Yakit with him, sir."

"I don't care about any Yakit," Aistenz snarled, but changed his tone when he turned back to Eckhart. "You must help me fight the Lion Tribe."

"Me!" Eckhart exclaimed. "I can't fight the Lion Tribe. They're too strong."

"I lost many good men when you destroyed the Oksite crystal over Pheste. I need all the fighters I can muster. You have…how many on your crew?"

"Only four, counting—"

Aistenz noticed Akkek standing there. "Akkek Stratha! I've waited a long time for this."

Akkek stepped forward to stand next to Eckhart. "Thank you for getting me out of the Silvercloud Vault, Aistenz. I'm forever in your debt."

"Nonsense, my dear. You could have escaped from the prison at any time and we both know it, but you're very polite to say so."

“If you don’t mind, I want to go to Imeliv H8 now,” Akkek went on. “I would have gone there immediately, but Eckhart insisted that I see you first.”

“Of course. That’s what I pay him for.”

“So,” she went on. “Unless there’s nothing else, I’ll just—”

“You can’t leave, my dear. I need you to help us fight the Lion Tribe.”

“I can’t,” she told him, “and I have more important work elsewhere.”

“I really must insist. We need each other, and if the Lion Tribe finds out about you, they’ll hunt you down. You have to stay.”

Eckhart listened to this exchange with interest. What did Akkek and Aistenz have on each other that would mean so much to the Lion Tribe?

Everyone knew the Lion Tribe hated Aistenz as much as Aistenz hated the Lion Tribe. No one criminal overlord as powerful as Aistenz could survive for very long without making equally powerful enemies. Every other criminal syndicate wanted to knock off Aistenz, and many had tried.

That didn’t explain Akkek, though. Why did he take such an interest in her? Why did he care so much to free her from a prison she could have left anytime she wanted?

He didn’t know about her powers then, so he couldn’t have been planning to use Akkek against the Lion Tribe or anyone else—except maybe the Regiment.

She only smiled up at Aistenz. “I understand, but I have to go. Thank you again, Aistenz. If you need anything, just let me know.”

She turned away and headed for the exit. Bing moved out of her way, but she only got halfway there before Aistenz called after her. “Stop, Akkek!”

“It’s been a pleasure doing business with you, Aistenz,” she called over her shoulder.

“If you stay and help me fight the Lion Tribe,” he boomed, “I’ll forgive your debt. I’ll release you.”

She stopped on a dime, but she didn’t turn around. She bowed her head and sighed.

“Defeat the Lion Tribe for me and I’ll never ask again,” he went on. “You can disappear and I’ll never look for you again. You never have to see me or make yourself recognizable to me.”

She fiddled with her hands for a second and finally spun around

to face him. “All right. It’s a deal.”

Aistenz nodded at Squids. “Find quarters for the *Marathon* crew while we—”

“Wait a minute,” Eckhart interrupted. “If we’re really going to war against the Lion Tribe, I have a favor to ask you, Aistenz.”

“What is it now? Haven’t I done you enough favors for one lifetime?”

“Fine. It isn’t a favor for me. It’s for someone who helped get me back alive. Is that enough to get you interested?”

“Who is it?” Aistenz husked.

“He’s the security officer from Parilia, and he wants to go back there. He didn’t sign up to fight the Lion Tribe. He just wanted to help me out.”

“Fine. He can take a ship back to Parilia, or he can ride in one of our transports. We have shipments going there all the time. Squids will arrange it.”

“I have a favor to ask, too, Aistenz,” Akkek cut in.

Aistenz growled something indistinct.

Akkek plunged ahead without waiting for an answer. “I want you to bring Ilke here.”

Eckhart stiffened. This had been coming for a long time, and now that it was here, he wasn’t looking forward to it.

“What do you want with Ilke?” Aistenz asked.

“I don’t want anything with Ilke,” Akkek replied. “You’re the one who wants something from her…and the rest of the Bloody Blossoms.”

“What are you talking about? What do I want with the Bloody Blossoms?”

“You have an alliance with them. You do business with them.”

“Everyone does business with them. They’re some of the best assassins in the galaxy.”

“You got that right,” Akkek muttered.

“Akkek is right,” Eckhart added. “Ilke has a few things she needs to tell you, Aistenz.”

Aistenz rounded on him. “What does this have to do with you? What have you been doing with Ilke while you were on Sorix?”

“Just bring her here.” Akkek turned to Squids. “Will you please bring her here, Squids? This is important, especially if you plan to use the Bloody Blossoms in your war against the Lion Tribe.”

“Who else am I supposed to use?” Aistenz demanded, but Squids

was already slipping out of the room.

"I hope you know what you're doing, Eckhart," Aistenz hissed. "It never pays to cross the Bloody Blossoms."

"You've known me for years," Eckhart replied. "You trust Akkek, and you hired me to get her out of the Silvercloud Vault, but neither of us is asking you to take our word for it. Ilke will tell you herself."

"Tell me what?" Aistenz asked, but at that moment, Squids returned.

Eckhart breathed a sigh of relief when Dallas entered along with Ilke. Ilke smiled at everyone with that maddening, insulting smile. She put on a brave face in front of Aistenz, but she wouldn't be smiling like that pretty soon.

"What is this all about?" Aistenz demanded. "I'm tired. Whatever you have to say, say it now and leave me alone. I need to rest."

"Well?" Akkek asked. "Tell him, Ilke."

"Tell him what?" Ilke asked.

"The Bloody Blossoms made a deal with the Regiment," Eckhart prompted. "The Bloody Blossoms agreed with the Regiment to help them wipe out the fringe aliens."

"That's nonsense!" Aistenz hissed. "The Bloody Blossoms *are* fringe aliens."

"I was integrated with Ilke on the *Marathon*," Akkek added. "The Regiment created a blood-borne virus they planned to release on the fringe aliens. The Bloody Blossoms agreed to help their plan. In exchange, the Regiment would give the Bloody Blossoms advanced warning of the attack so the Blossoms could reach a safe distance and escape the slaughter."

"That's preposterous!" Aistenz snarled. "I've done business with the Bloody Blossoms for years. They would never take part in anything like this."

"Ilke betrayed our crew on Taio," Dallas chimed in. "She alerted the Regiment that we were acquiring heat shielding there to break Akkek out of prison. Then she attacked us again en route to Pheste. She would have destroyed the *Marathon*, but Akkek bound her so she couldn't attack us."

"You don't have to believe us, Aistenz," Akkek added. "Ask Ilke yourself. The Mozari are incapable of lying."

"This is outrageous!" Aistenz blustered. "The Bloody Blossoms

would never enter into such a bargain with the Regiment. I will never believe that."

Akkek turned to Ilke. "Did the Bloody Blossoms make a deal with the Regiment? Did the Bloody Blossoms agree to help the Regiment unleash a deadly virus that would wipe out all the fringe aliens?"

Ilke smiled at her. Ilke's dark eyes darted toward Aistenz and then back to Akkek. "Yes, they did."

"And did you help your sisters carry out this plot?" Dallas asked. "Did you alert the Regiment that Coleman DeWalt was on Taio with the *Marathon* crew so they would attack us and retake DeWalt?"

She dipped her eyelashes at him. "Yes, Dallas. You know I did. You were there."

"And did you create a diversion on Sorix and try to kill Dallas so you could escape from Akkek to stop her from bringing you to justice?" Eckhart asked.

Ilke burst out laughing. "Of course I did, Eckhart! What was I supposed to do—sit quietly in your Crick centrifuge and wait for Aistenz to kill me? Of course I tried to escape."

Aistenz stared at her through her confession. His wings hardly buzzed at all now. "Did you have anything to do with the Megaliths attacking Pheste? Did you call them to attack me there?"

"No, Aistenz," she breathed. "I didn't have anything to do with that."

Aistenz turned away, and his wings started stuttering and floundering to carry him back and forth across the chamber. "You can go now. I need to think about this."

"I can arrange guards to contain her," Squids suggested.

"You don't need them," Dallas replied. "I'll make sure she doesn't go anywhere."

"Are you sure you want to do that?" Akkek asked. "Are you sure she won't get away from you again?"

"She won't. She'll stay, won't you, Ilke? You won't try to escape again, will you?"

She curled up her lips and her eyelashes dipped again. "Why would I want to escape from you, Dallas? I love you."

"I thought you said she's incapable of lying," Aistenz hissed.

"She isn't lying," Dallas replied. "She's out of her mind."

Ilke burst out laughing again, and Dallas guided her out of Aistenz's room. No one spoke until the door closed behind them.

“I’d better go, too.” Akkek stepped forward and patted Aistenz’s abdomen. “I’ll see you later, Aistenz. Let me know when you’re ready for me to do something against the Lion Tribe.”

Aistenz let out an agonized hiss after Akkek left. He bobbed over to the mattress-covered platform and descended onto it. He stretched out with a shuddering exhalation. “If your Yakit can do anything for me, Eckhart, I would be extremely grateful.”

Bing stepped forward. “I don’t know if I can do anything, but I’ll try.”

“I don’t care anymore,” Aistenz rasped. “I would rather die than live with this pain any longer.”

Bing bent over him. “Where does it hurt the most?”

“Here.” Aistenz waved one of his remaining limbs toward the burns on his body. “And my wings. The pain drives me insane.”

“Have you ever had Eplite before?” Bing asked.

“No. Never.”

“It’s worth a shot, isn’t it?” Bing spat a wad of Eplite on the biggest of Aistenz’s burns.

They started to sizzle on contact and Aistenz let out a blood-chilling shriek. He reared off the mattresses and almost bowled Bing backward.

Bing sprang out of the way and Eckhart rushed forward to get his friend out of danger, but by the time he got there, Aistenz was already collapsing back on the mattress. His whole body quivered.

“It burns…but the pain is going away now.” His voice started to fade.

“Do you want me to keep going?” Bing asked.

“Yes,” Aistenz replied. “Keep going. It feels much better now that the burn is over.”

Bing glanced over at Eckhart, but Eckhart only shrugged. He wasn’t sure he wanted Bing working on Aistenz. He dreaded finding out how Aistenz reacted to having his wings treated.

Bing hesitated and finally deposited another dose of Eplite on another one of Aistenz’s burns. Aistenz hissed and snarled, but he didn’t react the same way. A second later, he started to relax even more. “That feels good.”

Bing moved around him. “Let’s try your wings now.”

Eckhart stood next to the bed. He didn’t want to leave Bing alone with Aistenz.

Aistenz turned his head to the wall with another long, raspy

breath. “We will wipe out the Lion Tribe once and for all, Eckhart. Then you will be free. You will never have to worry about them seeking revenge again.”

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10

Eckhart stepped into the *Marathon*'s cargo hold to find Dallas, Bing, Alice, and Rixby all standing around shooting the bull. "What's up?" Eckhart looked around. "Where's Ilke? I thought you were keeping an eye on her."

"Squids took her," Dallas replied. "He said Aistenz has some high-security lockup where he wants to keep her. I wasn't sorry to see her go, either."

"Akkek is in VIP quarters on Aistenz's deck," Rixby added. "She's too good for us now."

Eckhart clapped Dallas on the shoulder. "Welp. It's just us chickens again. All the patsies are finally gone."

"Akkek wasn't a patsy," Bing countered. "We'd all be dead if not for her."

"She was more trouble than she was worth," Alice growled. "Give me a working Crick centrifuge any day of the week."

"Have you heard anything about the big war yet?" Dallas asked.

"Nothing." Eckhart wandered over to the centrifuge and pulled out his toolkit. "I should probably start working on the ship. We'll need a ship when the Datrium starts flying."

"You don't really think Aistenz will have us flying this bucket, do you?" Alice called after him. "This ship isn't good for more than scrap anymore, Eckhart."

"Maybe not, but it's mine. If Aistenz doesn't want me using the *Marathon* against the Lion Tribe, I'll still need something to fly when the war is over."

"If we're still alive, that is," Dallas added.

"You have an unlimited bank account from Aistenz," Bing reminded Eckhart. "Just buy yourself a new ship."

"Or several," Rixby added. "You could buy one for each of us."

Eckhart stuck his head out of the centrifuge to examine his friends. "Do you want a new ship? Does any of you?"

Bing and Dallas exchanged glances. Rixby shuffled her big feet, and Alice looked away. "Not really," Bing mumbled.

Eckhart pulled his head in. "Let me know if you change your minds. For now, I'm working on this one."

“That’s all you ever do,” Dallas told him.

Eckhart laughed. “I haven’t worked on it since we first took Clifton and DeWalt on board, and God knows it needs it.” He tossed his spanner into the toolkit and pulled out a screwdriver. “Could you go up to the bridge, Rixby? I want to check on the adjustments.”

“Do I have to?” she asked. “I’m kind of busy.”

“What are you doing that you’re so busy?”

“Talking to these slouches.”

Eckhart chuckled and pulled his head back inside the centrifuge. He weaseled his body as far back inside it as he could. He was where he belonged. He didn’t want to be anywhere else.

The sound of the other four talking and laughing out in the cargo bay soothed his nerves. He didn’t care much how badly damaged the *Marathon* was. He had rebuilt the ship several times already when it was damaged much worse than this. He could do it again.

He would rather spend the money Aistenz paid him on parts to fix the *Marathon* than to buy a new ship. He didn’t want a new ship, no matter how slick and powerful it was. He wanted this one. It was his and always would be.

His mind wandered back to the war against the Lion Tribe, and Aistenz’s words came back to him.

We will wipe out the Lion Tribe once and for all, Eckhart. Then you will be free. You will never have to worry about them seeking revenge again.

Free. What would it feel like to be free, to wander anywhere he wanted in the galaxy, to accept whatever work he wanted to do, without always looking over his shoulder?

He’d been looking over his shoulder ever since he left Parilia. He’d been holding his breath and waiting for the day the Lion Tribe found out that he was the one who hit Zels Ariat.

He had always been careful about what he said to whom, and he never dared to tell anyone that he was responsible for that hit. He knew he wouldn’t last a day once the Lion Tribe found out.

Now they knew and he was here, under Aistenz Trotaer’s protection. Once the war broke out, anyone who worked or fought for Aistenz would be fair game.

If Aistenz didn’t win the war, the *Marathon* crew would have to flee anyway—if they were still alive at all. Did Eckhart want to take

that chance?

Freedom. Eckhart was willing to risk anything for a chance not to look over his shoulder anymore.

He knew better than to ask his crew if they really wanted to fight this war. They would leave of their own accord if they wanted to. Asking them again and again wouldn't win him any friends.

He finished adjusting the Crick centrifuge and climbed out. The rest of the crew were in the middle of laughing about something, but they stopped as soon as Eckhart appeared. They must have been laughing about him, but he didn't care. Just seeing them standing around laughing warmed his heart. He should give them more moments like this.

He picked up his toolkit and crossed to the stairs when Bing called after him. "What's next, Eckhart? Don't you want to recalibrate the volatility bolt aligner?"

"How about you retune my nutrient aperture in the galley?" Dallas added. "Maybe you can change it to lime flavored."

The whole crew exploded in laughter, and Eckhart joined in. The idea of Dallas tasting anything sounded so funny.

Rixby squeaked with laughter, too, but when she started to say something, Squids stuck his head into the hold. "If you would all follow me, Aistenz is requesting your presence at a strategy meeting with his top generals."

"Generals!" Bing asked. "We aren't generals."

"*You* definitely aren't," Alice snarled.

"Aistenz would like to assign each of you to head one of his fighter squadrons in the air battle against the Lion Tribe," Squids went on. "He's noted your decision-making abilities, and he'd like you to lead his pilots. This is an honor, and could earn you big rewards if you succeed."

"And if we don't succeed?" Alice hissed.

"If you don't succeed, I doubt you have to worry about the consequences."

"What about me?" Dallas asked. "I don't have any flight experience. I won't be any better in a fighter squadron than an untrained first-time pilot."

"Aistenz has a special mission for you, Mr. Eldridge."

"He does?" Eckhart asked. "What is it?"

"Aistenz will explain all that in good time." Squids turned away. "I'm going up to the meeting now. If you don't wish to accept

Aistenz's invitation, I will communicate your apologies to him."

"What was that all about?" Dallas asked after Squids disappeared.

Bing elbowed him. "Your fighter wouldn't be able to get off the ground if you did try to fly one."

Eckhart dropped his screwdriver into his toolkit. "I guess we might as well go upstairs and see what he wants."

"Squids told us what he wants," Rixby replied. "He wants to put us in charge of separate fighter squadrons."

"What about you?" Bing asked her. "I'd love to see you fly a fighter."

Everyone laughed and the crew headed down the ramp. They found Squids waiting for them at the lift, and they rode up to Aistenz's deck.

Squids didn't take them to Aistenz's bedroom, though. He turned off and led the crew into an enormous hall lined with curved tiers. Hundreds of aliens packed the benches, and they all talked at once.

Eckhart waded into the mix and saw at a glance that he was the only Earthling in the room. Some of Aistenz's people turned around to stare at him as he passed, but he hardly noticed. That had been happening to him for as long as he could remember.

He and his crew turned off into one of the few empty tiers left, but Squids dodged in to stop them. "You go downstairs, Eckhart. Aistenz wants you down there with him."

"Me? Why? What about the rest of the crew?"

"The rest of the crew, too." Squids pointed down at the bottom of the auditorium. Aistenz fluttered from the end of his chain by a large podium.

He looked much better now that he'd had several Eplite treatments from Bing. Most of the burns on his abdomen had healed either partially or totally. His ruined eye still didn't work, but at least it had started to return to its normal color.

His wings weren't in any better shape. Bing couldn't regrow them, and they would never be normal again, but they didn't cause him as much pain.

That didn't put Aistenz in any better mood, though, and he seemed to be expressing his frustration through aggression against the Lion Tribe.

He snarled at the *Marathon* crew when Eckhart showed up at his side, but Eckhart was getting used to that, too.

He'd never spent this much time around Aistenz before. He was starting to understand why everyone from Aistenz's closest lieutenants all the way down the chain of command feared even to set foot in Aistenz's presence. Only Squids could tolerate Aistenz's company for long.

Eckhart got a first-hand glimpse of this on Aistenz's battlecruiser. Almost none of Aistenz's people would even talk about Aistenz, much less reveal how they wound up in his service.

Eckhart was starting to grasp just how unusual his own relationship with Aistenz was. Aistenz didn't intimidate Eckhart when Eckhart first accepted the job to hit Zels Ariat, even though Eckhart was only a teenager then.

Then again, Eckhart didn't understand who Aistenz Trotaer was at the time. Eckhart probably would have been too scared to walk into the same room with Aistenz if he had known.

Ever since that hit, Aistenz had always treated Eckhart with consideration and friendliness, but that didn't make him considerate and friendly. Aistenz directed his ire at his underlings. He wouldn't hesitate to eliminate anyone who failed to do their job to his standard.

That attitude never extended to Eckhart or, by extension, his crew. Even now, Eckhart found it difficult to believe that Aistenz would ever turn against him, but that was an illusion. Aistenz was never loyal to anyone but himself. Eckhart kicked himself for not being more cautious of Aistenz.

Squids hurried down the tiers to Aistenz's side and pressed something on the large desk in front of Aistenz. A deafening siren screeched through the auditorium, and the whole assembly fell silent.

Squids hit another button and a screen blinked on behind him. "This is the line of our battlecruisers currently occupying the Dothea system." Squids pointed out the dots on the screen. "The Lion Tribe will approach from this side, so we will station our squadrons here…and here."

He traced the direction and approach from the system's different planets.

"Squadron One and Squadron Ten will launch from the *Atera* and fly over Rulara. They'll conduct bombing runs on the Lion Tribe's headquarters at Black Mountain. The Lion Tribe will launch their own attack force to defend themselves. Squadrons One and

Ten will fall back to draw the Lion Tribe off the planet. Squadron Seven will follow up to make sure the Lion Tribe launches all their attack ships."

"Eckhart will lead this phase of the operation," Aistenz announced, and a bunch of the assembled aliens on the right side of the room surged half out of their seats. People started whispering excitedly, and some even pumped their fists.

Eckhart's hair stood up on the back of his neck. What did these people know about him that they would get so enthusiastic about him leading their assault?

"Squadrons Two and Eight will wait behind Sorix, while Squadrons Four and Six will wait behind Sion…here," Squids went on. "As soon as the forward squadrons return with the Lion Tribe in tow, our fleet will engage with them and these four squadrons will attack to flank them on both sides. Alice will lead this phase of the operation."

Dead silence fell over the audience, and everyone stared at Alice with huge eyes. Eckhart shivered again. What had Aistenz and Squids been telling these people about the *Marathon* crew?

Alice didn't seem to notice. "What about the EM field? Why not lead the Lion Tribe into the EM field? Their ships will be destroyed and they'll crash."

"I was just getting to that." Squids pointed at his screen again. "As soon as Squadrons Two, Eight, Four, and Six engage the Lion Tribe and box them into the Dothea system, the fleet will fall back toward the EM field. The Lion Tribe will think they are driving us back, and all four flanking squadrons will need to slacken their assault to make the ruse more convincing. As soon as the Lion Tribe gets near the EM field, Squadron Five will launch from behind Caelae. They'll attack the Lion Tribe from behind and drive them the rest of the way into the EM field."

A cheer went up from the assembled aliens. They clapped and whistled until Squids waved for silence.

"Bing will lead Squadron Five, and all fighter pilots will need to prepare so they don't get driven across the field along with the enemy."

"What about me?" Rixby squeaked. "I won't be any good as a pilot."

"You're much too important to be a pilot," Squids replied. "You'll be in our command center coordinating the battle."

Rixby glanced up at Eckhart, but he could only beam down at her. Commanding an operation as big and as dangerous as this was the perfect job for her. He would feel much better conducting bombing runs on the Lion Tribe with Rixby in charge.

"What about me?" Dallas asked. "What's the special mission you have for me?"

Aistenz waved one of his arms, and Squids raised his voice over the crowd. "You can all check your duty rosters on the landing platform to find out which ships you're assigned to. You'll need to run full diagnostics and battle protocols before your launch time. You're dismissed."

The aliens in the seats filed out of the auditorium. It took a long time before the chamber fell silent again. "Well?" Alice demanded. "What's this mission you want to send Dallas on? It better not be anything dangerous."

"If you don't mind," Aistenz hissed, "I would appreciate it if you and Bing would return to the landing platform. I would like you to acquaint yourselves with your pilots so they get to know you before they follow you into a deadly air battle."

"We aren't going anywhere," Bing returned. "We want to hear what Dallas is going to be doing."

"I would be very grateful, Rixby," Aistenz rasped, "if you would follow Squids up to the command center and familiarize yourself with the equipment and staff there. I'd like you to be fully conversant in our systems so we don't have any unpleasant delays in communication when the time comes."

"Okay." She turned away and waddled out of the room. That left Bing and Alice.

They glared at Aistenz, but he didn't budge. He stared right back at them, but Eckhart couldn't read Aistenz's expression as easily as he could Bing's and Alice's. They made no effort at all to hide their disgust for what he was asking them to do.

They might have stood there glaring at each other forever, but Eckhart stepped in. He tapped Bing's elbow. "Go on. I'll catch up with you later."

Bing scowled even more furiously and Alice spun away. They both stormed out and an even more dangerous silence fell over the now-empty auditorium.

"This won't work," Eckhart told Aistenz as soon as the three of them were alone. "You can wipe out the Lion Tribe's attack force,

but that will still leave all their people on Rulara. They have thousands of people inside Black Mountain. They'll rebuild. This campaign won't end the war. It will only spark a much bigger war."

"That's exactly why we're doing it," Aistenz rasped. "I have no intention of wiping out the entire Lion Tribe here—in the Dothea system. That would be impossible."

"So what's your plan?"

Aistenz turned back to Dallas. "I brought you here, Mr. Eldridge, to tell you that I have set Ilke at liberty."

"You *what*?" Dallas growled.

"I turned her loose. I sent her back to her sisters on Zuic 7HP9."

"How could you do this?" Eckhart blurted out. "How could you just turn her loose after what she did? How could you not believe us when we told you what the Bloody Blossoms planned to do? She told you to your face that it was true."

"I sent her back to her sisters because I hired the Bloody Blossoms to hit Black Mountain for me."

Eckhart gaped at Aistenz with his mouth open. He couldn't put together what Aistenz was telling him.

"As soon as the Lion Tribe sends out its attack force to attack our fleet, the Bloody Blossoms will launch an annihilation campaign against Black Mountain. They will wipe out everyone inside the compound. I have hired *all* of the Bloody Blossoms—the whole order. It will take all of them working together to get inside the compound and do away with every last member of the Lion Tribe."

"I don't understand," Dallas replied. "I don't see what this has to do with me."

"Once all the Bloody Blossoms enter Black Mountain, when they are all inside, you will launch the last phase of our plan, Mr. Eldridge. You will lay waste to Black Mountain with all the Bloody Blossoms inside. You will ensure, once the Bloody Blossoms finish the Lion Tribe, that *none* of the Bloody Blossoms survive to leave the planet. Do you think you can do that?" Aistenz paused and then almost whispered, "Ilke will be with them."

Eckhart tore his eyes away from Aistenz. He'd never understood until this moment just how bloodthirsty and vengeful Aistenz could be. Eckhart heard all the stories. He heard Aistenz Trotaer's name whispered in the darkest corners of the galaxy.

He never understood until right now why or how Aistenz earned that reputation as one of the most dangerous criminal overlords in

the galaxy—if not *the* most dangerous.

Dallas stared at Aistenz, too, and then looked down at the floor. "I can do it. I'll get rid of them."

"Are you sure?" Eckhart asked. He started to ask if Dallas could really bring himself to kill Ilke, but he stopped himself from saying that. Dallas wouldn't agree to this if he wasn't sure.

"You must do this alone," Aistenz went on. "I can't send any other troops to Rulara. The Lion Tribe's security would detect them. I need a sole operative to go in and deliver the final blow. I need you to do this for the whole fringe population. I know you were an Earthling originally—"

"I'll do it. You don't have to worry about me. I'm ready."

"You'll have to be careful," Eckhart warned. "Even one Mozari is dangerous, but you'll be facing the whole order."

Dallas only gazed at him. Eckhart couldn't read his expression through his helmet, and Eckhart was the one who finally turned away.

"If you're ready, I will provide you with a ship," Aistenz went on. "It will have an automated pilot. I cannot afford to waste a living pilot, and I will arrange for the ship to crash on Rulara. If the Lion Tribe detects the ship, they will assume it was unmanned because you possess so little organic tissue."

Eckhart's stomach turned. He didn't want to think about this, but Dallas didn't seem to mind the topic at all. "That's a good plan. Just tell me when you want me to leave."

"You will leave in two days. You will need to be on Rulara when we launch our offensive, but you will need to be well clear of the compound when Eckhart's squadrons begin their assault. Do you understand?"

"I understand," Dallas replied. "I'm pulling up available maps of the planet, but they're incomplete. I'll have to talk to Rixby about this. She can upload some more current schematics to my operating system so I know where I'm going."

"I will receive strategic information from the Bloody Blossoms and I will pass it on to you," Aistenz told him. "You'll know exactly when they plan to assault the compound and where they plan to strike first."

Dallas nodded. "Thank you. I appreciate any intelligence you can give me."

"Good. You can go. You have two days to prepare."

Dallas started toward the door, and Eckhart fell in at his side. He studied his friend on their way back down to the landing platform, but Eckhart couldn't think of anything to say. He kept stopping himself again and again from asking Dallas if he really was sure he wanted to do this.

Dallas didn't speak, either. He stared straight ahead like Eckhart wasn't there. What was Dallas thinking about? Was he thinking about killing Ilke? Did that thought give him pause, or did it motivate him to hurry up and get down there so he could annihilate the Bloody Blossoms down to the last woman?

Eckhart searched his brain for something intelligent to say, but when they entered the landing platform, he discovered the rest of the *Marathon* crew standing there with Squids. The old Bion threw up his hands. "Ah! Good. You're here."

"What's going on?"

"This." Squids waved at three shiny new Velocity-class fighter craft parked in line with the rest. "These are for you."

"What for?" Eckhart asked. "We have the *Marathon*."

Bing snorted so loudly that Alice started chuckling, too. Squids pretended not to hear. "You can't take the *Marathon*. It's too big and too…"

"Wrecked?" Bing finished.

"I was going to say damaged," Squids replied.

"It's more than damaged," Alice growled. "It's demolished."

"I would say derelict," Dallas added.

"It isn't derelict," Eckart insisted. "I've repaired—"

"Yeah, yeah," Bing interrupted. "We've heard it all before. You've fixed the ship when it was more damaged than this, but you weren't heading into a fighter battle against the Lion Tribe then."

Bing and Alice went over to the Velocitys. Bing ran his hand along the glistening hull of the nearest fighter and he and Alice started talking.

Squids gripped Eckhart's shoulder. "Finish this battle and we'll repair the *Marathon* for you."

Eckhart sighed. "I'm getting tired of other people repairing the *Marathon* for me. That never ends well."

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11

Eckhart stepped into the *Marathon*'s cargo hold and met Innyria coming toward him. Eckhart crushed his friend's shoulder. "Good news, pal. Aistenz is giving you a ship to fly back to Parilia…or he said you can hitch a ride on one of his shipment transports. You're going home."

Innyria glanced behind Eckhart toward the landing platform. "Do you think…I could have one of those?"

Eckhart looked over his shoulder to see what Innyria was looking at. The three brand new Velocitys filled the view beyond the ramp. "One of those? You want one?"

Innyria shrugged. "It beats going back to Parilia, doesn't it?"

Eckhart burst out laughing. "That's not saying much, is it?"

Innyria grinned. "You might be having a bad influence on me."

"So which squadron do you want to get killed in?"

"Yours, of course."

Eckhart blushed and turned to gaze out at the Velocitys, too. "You might want to think about that. I don't have the best luck, you know."

"You always have the best luck, Eckhart. You always come back alive."

"You call this alive? You wouldn't want to come back alive after what happened with Vora."

Innyria winced. "That was Vora. I'm not going out against Vora. Besides, if the Chosen and the Immortals find out I fought in a war against the Lion Tribe, it could even boost my standing in certain circles."

"It's your funeral, pal. You better go tell Squids to put you on the roster…and don't expect any special treatment just because we go way back. You can expect me to drive you just as hard as my other slaves."

Innyria cracked another grin on his way down the ramp. "I can see how you drive your slaves, Eckhart. Why do you think I'm staying?"

Eckhart laughed on his way into the ship. He didn't drive slaves. He could barely get his friends to do what he wanted on this ship

without each of them chipping in with their own opinions or flat-out refusing to do what he wanted them to.

His laughter died when he entered the bridge to find Rixby and Dallas there. Rixby stood on her workstation, but she still didn't come up to Dallas' shoulder. "Run through the records from Zuic 7HP9," Dallas told her.

"I already did that," Rixby replied. "I'm switching back to the Battle of Yavunus. Plenty of them died there."

"No," Dallas insisted. "I want to see the records from Zuic."

"What for?" Rixby insisted. "She's only one. That won't tell you how to deal with several."

Dallas pointed to the workstation under Rixby's feet. "Just bring it up. Please."

Rixby sighed and got to work. "What are you doing?" Eckhart asked.

"We're going over battle data to find instances when gunfire harmed Mozari," Dallas replied. "I want to find out if there are any modifications I can make to my assault guns to overcome their laser fire."

"I already told you a thousand times," Rixby cut in. "Harming the Mozari won't do you any good. You need a way to protect yourself from their lasers."

"There is no way to protect myself from their lasers," Dallas countered.

"Will you listen to me for two seconds? If you look at the records from the Battle of Yavunus, you'll see the Mozari firing their lasers at the satellite dish and the lasers bouncing off it. The colonists must have hardened it. They made it impenetrable to Mozari laser fire."

Eckhart stared at the side of Dallas' helmet and felt sick to his stomach. His friend was going into battle against the Bloody Blossoms alone. He would be facing down not just one Mozari but hundreds.

Dallas would have to find a way to kill the Bloody Blossoms—all of them. The thought gave Eckhart shivers.

"Fine," Dallas snapped. "Show me the battle."

Rixby brought up footage of a massive battle between two alien species. Most of the footage was obscured by hundreds of plasma blasts from both sides. The shots exploded in front of the camera feed and blotted out pretty much everything else.

All at once, Rixby stabbed her finger at the screen. “There! Right there. See the shot that hits the dish?”

“No,” Dallas replied. “Not really. It’s so obscure.”

“I’m telling you a laser blast hit the dish and bounced off.”

“That doesn’t tell me anything,” Dallas countered. “This tells me nothing about what frequency the colonists were using to deflect the shot. We can’t even tell if the shot was a laser or plasma.”

“But it proves it can be done,” Rixby argued. “We can modify—”

Eckhart threw up his hands. “I can’t listen to this.”

He left the bridge trying to remember what he’d gone there for in the first place, but he couldn’t think about anything but Dallas.

Dallas would leave in two days. Eckhart wouldn’t see him...maybe ever again. If Dallas didn’t find a way to protect himself from the Bloody Blossoms, he wouldn’t be coming back from Rulara.

Eckhart didn’t check where he was going, and ended up walking out onto the platform. The other pilots and mechanics flowed back and forth, but Eckhart didn’t see them.

His eye fell on the Velocitys parked near the *Marathon*. Those fighter craft sure looked nice compared to the charred, crumpled remains of the *Marathon*. Bing was right. The *Marathon* was a wreck, but Eckhart still loved it the best.

Still, if he had to carry out a bombing run over Black Mountain, he couldn’t think of a nicer ship to do it in.

Alice sat in the cockpit of her own Velocity and looked down at the controls. She didn’t see Eckhart. He didn’t see Bing anywhere.

He inched closer to the nearest Velocity and ran his hand down the smooth hull. It sent a shiver up his arm, and he glanced over his shoulder at the *Marathon*.

A surge of guilt went through him like the *Marathon* might be watching him. Then he remembered. It was just a ship. The *Marathon* didn’t know he was looking at another ship.

He circled the Velocity and came back to his original position. He could work with this, and it was only for one battle. He could do this. He had to if it got him and the *Marathon* free from worry, free from attack, free from always, always running.

He shook himself and went back into the *Marathon*. He wasn’t sure what he wanted to do, so he went to his quarters. He halted when he passed Dallas’ door.

Dallas stood inside staring at the wall. Dallas’ room didn’t have

a bunk or a chair or a table like Eckhart's. Dallas didn't sleep lying down like a normal Earthling. He went dormant standing up.

Dallas stood perfectly still without moving, but something in his posture told Eckhart that Dallas wasn't sleeping.

Eckhart stepped into the cabin and stopped next to his friend. Dallas didn't respond. Eckhart couldn't see whether Dallas was dormant or just standing there, but Eckhart didn't speak or leave.

What could he say to a man tasked with hunting down the woman he used to love? What could Eckhart say to a man tasked with slaughtering not just her but all her sisters, in what would probably be the most heinous battle of the whole bloody war?

He should say something. He should maybe prod Dallas to talk about it the way Bing got Eckhart to talk about Vora, but the words wouldn't come. There was nothing to say that could make sense of this.

Why did it have to be Dallas? Why couldn't Aistenz get someone else to lead his fighter squadrons and send the whole *Marathon* crew to Rulara?

Eckhart already knew the answer to that. Aistenz could only land one person on the planet, and Dallas was the only person strong enough to defeat the Bloody Blossoms. Dallas' prosthetics would hide him landing at all.

Eckhart wanted to protect Dallas from that. Eckhart would gladly have gone to Rulara alone to save Dallas from facing not just the Bloody Blossoms but Ilke, too. That must be the hardest part. Dallas had to kill Ilke.

How strange it felt to want to protect Dallas from anything. Dallas was so big, so strong, so well armored. He was always protecting the rest of the *Marathon* crew from everything.

Now he seemed fragile and vulnerable, maybe even small. Eckhart had always liked Dallas. Dallas was the nearest thing to another Earthling that Eckhart had on this crew.

Eckhart had never felt before that Dallas might have a heart that could ache like anyone else's. Not even knowing how Dallas used to feel about Ilke could bring the realization so firmly into Eckhart's mind.

He laid his hand on Dallas' shoulder, and in that instant, he didn't have to say anything.

Dallas looked down at the floor. He wasn't dormant at all. He was wide awake and he was going somewhere Eckhart couldn't

help him—in more ways than one.

Eckhart took his hand down. Should he leave? He glanced toward the door when Dallas spoke. “I need a favor, Eckhart.”

“Anything!” Eckhart whispered. “Just name it.”

“I want to take the anionic elasticity quantatid.”

Eckhart frowned. “What do you need that for?”

“Rixby thinks she can patch it into my internal sensory processors. She thinks she can rig it up to do some kind of anionic feedback loop. It will feed a frequency into my armor that she thinks will deflect Mozari lasers. I don’t really understand it, but it’s better than nothing, right?”

“Sure, man!” Eckhart touched Dallas’ shoulder again. “Take whatever you want.”

“Are you sure? I don’t want to cannibalize the *Marathon*. I know what this ship means to you…and Rixby said the ship won’t fly without the quantatid. She said they’re really hard to find and that the ship might never fly again if I…you know…if I don’t come back. She said you might not give it up.”

Eckhart hesitated for one second and made up his mind instantly. “Take it, man. Take whatever you need. Take the whole ship apart if you have to.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course! Jesus, man! Tear the damn ship apart if it helps you come back. I don’t give a shit about the damn ship.”

Dallas turned to look at him. “Thanks. This means a lot to me.”

“Christ, man! Did you really think I would say no? You’re a thousand times more important to me than the ship. I can get a ship anywhere. You’re—”

Eckhart shut his mouth and tried to swallow down the lump in his throat. Dallas was one of a kind in the whole universe, but not even that could explain how Eckhart felt about his friend.

He considered telling Dallas that he’d like to go to Rulara to take Dallas’ place, but Eckhart decided against it.

“I really appreciate it.”

Eckhart examined his friend’s helmet and decided to go ahead and finish this. “You’re my friend. If you want to talk about anything, I’m here. I, uh…” Eckhart passed his hand across his eyes. “I took a hit from Vora. I didn’t want to come back, but…”

“Are you insane?” Dallas blurted out. “How could you not want to come back?”

“That isn’t what I mean. I didn’t want to admit to anyone how bad it got at Vora’s base, but anyway, if you want to talk, I’m here. I was just thinking…you and Ilke, well, that’s gonna get hard—a hell of a lot harder than what happened to me.”

Dallas went back to staring at the floor. “I want to go. I want to end her. She’s a plague. I’ll never be able to rest as long as she’s out there. I should have ended her a long time ago. She never would have lived this long if I didn’t keep freezing up. I can’t let her get away with this, or anything else, ever again. It’s my job to end her and I won’t come back until I do.”

Eckhart gulped again. He didn’t expect Dallas to reveal so much. He expected Dallas to bottle it up—kind of like Eckhart tried to do until Bing stepped in.

“I’ll end the whole damn order. That’s the best they deserve.” Eckhart cringed when he heard the menace in his friend’s voice. Dallas never talked like this—ever. “I wish Aistenz had sent me to do something worse than just ending them. I wish he sent me to punish them. I would make them pay. I would make them suffer for even thinking about joining forces with the Regiment. I wish I could let loose a whole flock of Uhiths in Black Mountain. That would be too nice a fate for the Bloody Blossoms after what they tried to do to the whole fringe population.”

Eckhart stared at Dallas’ helmet with his jaw on the floor. Did Dallas just say *that*—kind, considerate, friendly, easy-going Dallas? Did he really just say he wished he could visit a fate worse than death—on *anyone*?

How could Eckhart live day and night with this man and never fully understand what kind of steel really dwelt in Dallas’ heart? What other dark secrets was Dallas hiding from the rest of the *Marathon* crew?

Did Dallas want to visit that fate on Ilke? He must. Dallas didn’t come right out and say so, but he meant it. He meant her more than anyone else. She betrayed him. She tried to kill him and then told him to his face that she loved him. Who could suffer a woman like that to keep living?

Aistenz couldn’t send Eckhart to Rulara. He couldn’t send the *Marathon* crew or anyone else. He had to send someone who hated the Bloody Blossoms as much as this. Only someone with this vendetta against the Bloody Blossoms would be able to defeat them.

Only Dallas cared enough to put the whole damn order in the

ground once and for all. Only Dallas had a symbol hateful enough to get him to do it. He would do it to make sure Ilke never got off the planet.

Eckhart cleared his throat with difficulty. “Do you need me to do anything else?”

“Naw,” Dallas murmured. “Rixby is helping me. I just wasn’t sure how to ask you about the parts.”

“Take ‘em,” Eckhart clapped Dallas’ shoulder one last time. This he could do. “Take the whole thing. I want you to. Send them to the Bloody Blossoms as a gift from all of us. We’re all pulling for you, buddy. If you need anything else, you let me know. We’re all with you.”

“Thanks, Eckhart.” Dallas turned to face him. “I *will* come back. Don’t worry about me.”

Eckhart tried to smile and his cheek spasmed. He had to get out of this cabin before he lost control of himself. “I can’t help worrying about you, man. I… Just come back. We need you.”

He bolted for the exit before he said too much, but when he thought about it later, he figured he already had.

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12

Eckhart slotted into the pilot's seat of his Velocity and all the controls switched on. A ring of light gleamed around him from a thousand lighted displays, and the tactical grid snapped into view the instant his ass hit the seat.

The safety harness slithered around his body and cinched him tight against the seat back. A thrill of adrenaline went through him and his mind switched gears. This was gonna be a sight different from flying the *Marathon*. It was gonna be different in the best possible way.

His fingers flew over the controls, adjusting, checking his Datrium reserves, and accessing records from Aistenz's fleet.

Rixby's voice chirped right next to Eckhart's ear. "Squadron One activated. Squadron Leader One, acknowledge."

"Squadron Leader One acknowledged," Eckhart said to no one. "Squadron One, acknowledge."

Innyria answered from the Velocity next to him. "Squadron One Alpha acknowledged. Ready to kick it into high gear on your command."

Fifteen more voices answered from all over the landing platform as each of Eckhart's pilots checked in with him. He had only met them a few times since Aistenz assigned Eckhart as Squadron Leader of the attack force that would bombard Black Mountain to draw the Lion Tribe into Aistenz's trap.

The last few days had passed in a blur that Eckhart would rather forget. He dreaded saying goodbye to Dallas, but when the time came, Dallas slipped away without saying goodbye to anybody.

He vanished behind everyone's backs, and no one in Aistenz's crew could even give Eckhart a straight answer about when Dallas left or how. Only Aistenz and Squids knew the truth, and neither of them would tell Eckhart anything.

Losing Dallas this way made it so much worse. Eckhart kept pacing around the battlecruiser looking for Dallas, but Dallas wasn't there. The rest of the *Marathon* crew went about their business. Alice and Bing had their hands full preparing their own squadrons for their assault, but Eckhart could tell Dallas' absence weighed on

them the same way.

Only Rixby acted normally, but then again, Eckhart hardly ever saw her. She spent all her time in Aistenz's command center, and she told Eckhart point blank that she didn't see Dallas leave.

His hands sped up on the controls when he thought about Dallas. Eckhart wanted to get to Rulara. He wanted to be there for Dallas. Going to Rulara would get him closer to Dallas, even if he didn't see Dallas on the planet.

As soon as Eckhart completed his bombing run and the Lion Tribe left Black Mountain, the Bloody Blossoms would strike and Dallas could finish his mission. The sooner Eckhart did his job, the sooner Dallas could come back.

He couldn't leave until Rixby gave him the word, though. More voices answered from all over the cruiser.

"Squadron Leader Five, acknowledge," Rixby called out.

"Squadron Leader Five acknowledged," Bing answered from a Velocity behind the *Marathon*. "Squadron Five, acknowledge."

Bing's squadrons went through their acknowledgements, and then Alice's squadrons did the same thing.

"Squadrons One and Ten, stand by to launch," Rixby ordered.

"Squadrons One and Ten standing by." Eckhart's pulse started to race. This was it. No more waiting around.

"Give the Lion Tribe a big, fat, wet kiss from me, buddy," Bing told him.

Eckhart laughed. "You ready to kick some Lion Tribe ass, Bing?"

"I won't have to, 'cuz you're gonna do it for us, right? There will be nothing left for the rest of us when you get finished with them."

"I wish that was true, but I'll do my worst."

"Just don't forget that you push the stick forward to make your Velocity fly faster," Innyria chimed in from his own fighter. "You might wind up flying backward if you forget which direction you're going."

Laughter broke out on the various communications channels between the fighters. "Who the hell is this guy?" Bing countered. "Wasn't he supposed to go back to his closet on Parilia? I don't remember inviting him to offer his opinion."

Eckhart laughed again, but before he could reply, the order came down. "Squadron Five, stand by to launch. Squadrons One and Ten, you are clear to launch. Give them hell for us, Squadron One."

“You got it, darlin’,” Eckhart replied. “Squadrons One and Ten, launch.”

Eckhart slammed his stick forward and the Velocity rocketed out of the battlecruiser so fast the momentum peeled his cheeks backward into his ears. He fought the feather-light controls to hold the ship on course.

The thrusters responded to the slightest adjustments of his wrist. Not even the last two days practicing with this ship had adequately prepared him for this.

He jammed the stick all the way forward and streaked out of the Dothea system in a blinding rush. The rest of his squadrons fell in behind him, and Innyria drew alongside. Eckhart checked the readouts from all his fighters, but their Velocitys were all finely tuned and running perfectly.

Conversation and jokes died the instant they launched, and Eckhart turned his attention to Rulara.

“I’m picking up activity around Black Mountain,” Innyria reported when they came within range.

“I got it,” Eckhart told him. “Reading all Lion Tribe signatures. It’s all the Lion Tribe’s usual shipping activity.”

“Not all.” Innyria sent Eckhart a signal on his long-range scanners. “There are Chosen and Jackal Clan signatures mixed up with the Lion Tribe vessels.”

Eckhart frowned at the readings. “That’s strange.”

“What do you want to do?” Innyria asked. “We can’t break off the attack.”

Eckhart cast his mind back to the planning and detail Aistenz put into this assault. Dozens of fighter pilots had been training for this. Eight other squadrons lay in wait around the Dothea system. They were all waiting for Eckhart to lead the Lion Tribe back into their trap.

Eckhart’s mind switched back to Dallas. Dallas risked everything to finish the Bloody Blossoms. If Eckhart broke off, Dallas would be stranded alone on Rulara with no way to know about it.

Eckhart couldn’t let that happen. Dallas was down there somewhere, and he was counting on Eckhart to do his job. “Fall into bombing run pattern 450.”

Innyria pulled sideways without hesitation. “Bombing run 450 executed. Let’s play some ball.”

The other fighters split into their two squadrons, and Eckhart

steered to port to join Squadron One. The two squadrons then divided into five attack groups each. They fanned out to surround Rulara.

A bunch of Lion Tribe security craft spun in their direction when they approached the planet, but the enemy couldn't follow all the attack groups whizzing around the planet. A few tried to track the squadrons down, but most stayed at their posts above Black Mountain.

Eckhart's chest tightened, and he held his breath for the moment of truth. None of the pilots spoke. They maintained communications silence right up until the moment when Eckhart's Velocity hurtled over the surrounding mountains.

Both squadrons blasted into the airspace over Black Mountain at the same instant. They took the Lion Tribe utterly by surprise, and all of Eckhart's fighters plunged downward to lay waste to the enemy.

Eckhart slammed his throttle to the wall and opened fire with all his guns blazing, but he ignored the security craft. He twisted through them and targeted the shipment transports, especially the Jackal Clan and Chosen ones.

He hit a Datrium transport, and the ship thumped in a giant flaming shockwave that consumed four ships near it. The attack squadrons wheeled in and out of the confusion, pelting everything in sight. Eckhart hammered a transmission dish positioned on the mountainside and came around for another pass.

He searched for more transports, and found only the security craft waiting for him. Innyria and three other pilots twirled rings around the security craft, taking dozens of hits on their EM shielding.

"Quit playing with your food, boy!" Eckhart called to Innyria. "Just finish them off already."

Innyria laughed. "Is this what you've been doing these last twenty years while I've been sitting behind a desk? I should have been a mercenary a long time ago."

"You wish!" Eckhart yelled back. "Now finish the job before they—"

He never got the words out before seven Banshee-class attack ships blasted out of a hidden opening in the mountain. They plunged for the attack squadrons and pounded Eckhart's shields.

"That's it!" he called to the rest of the squadron. "Fall back! The

Lion Tribe is launching! Fall back to Dothea!"

"I might need a little help with that," Innyria told him.

Eckhart glanced back to see the security craft pinning Innyria down. He tried to dodge them, but they backed him against the mountain. The Lion Tribe attack force supported the security vessels to block his path.

"Don't let this happen again," Eckhart snapped, and wheeled backward to help his friend.

A few Velocitys fell in to help him, but most followed their orders and rocketed out of the atmosphere. The Lion Tribe hounded them away on a course for Dothea.

Eckhart blasted into the Banshees and Innyria broke free. The rest of the fighter craft retreated before the Lion Tribe as more Banshees and even several Stalwarts launched from Black Mountain.

"Holy shit!" Innyria exclaimed. "They're really rolling out the red carpet."

"I told you I was a star," Eckhart countered. "Now quit jawing and fall back. Catch up with the rest of the squadron. We need to make sure they're all in one group so Squadron Five can cut them off."

He and Innyria increased their pace, and their comrades closed the gap to catch up with each other, but the Lion Tribe only matched them. The Stalwarts and Banshees saw their enemies fleeing and followed up their advantage.

The Banshees raced up behind Eckhart and Innyria. The enemy bombarded Eckhart's tail, and one of them hit Innyria's wing.

"Bastard!" Innyria yelled, and started to turn his Velocity around.

"Don't return fire!" Eckhart ordered. "Keep going."

"Are you nuts? They could kill us."

"Speed up," Eckhart told him. "Make them think you're scared for your life."

"Scared for my life!" Innyria snarled. "I'll show you scared for my life, you piece of shit!"

Eckhart smirked to himself and matched Innyria's speed change. They both streaked forward and rejoined the rest of the squadron.

The Lion Tribe took the bait and sped up, too. They increased their fire to drive the fighters forward.

"Battlecruisers coming in sight," Eckhart announced to the

squadron pilots. “Get behind the fleet and then wheel about to rejoin the battle.”

At his word, Aistenz’s battlecruisers pivoted, and Eckhart’s instruments showed all the cruisers powering up their weapons systems. The Lion Tribe must have picked up the same thing. The Stalwarts thundered forward, leaving the Banshees to pester the squadrons.

The Stalwarts fanned out to meet Aistenz’s fleet, and both groups opened fire. Their guns met in an unholy cloud of plasma that obliterated all sight of the fleet for a second.

“Punch through!” Eckhart ordered. “Come about to drive the Banshees into the fight.”

“Squadron Ten breaking off,” Innyria reported, and he banked hard to port.

Eckhart snaked between the battlecruiser’s shots, plummeted beyond Aistenz’s line, and wheeled to starboard. His squadron soared on either side, and they rotated all the way around the battle.

The Banshees didn’t see the ruse until it was too late. They followed the Stalwarts to help assault the battlecruisers, and the plasma explosions distracted them. They didn’t see the two squadrons circling to drive them in from behind.

The moment Eckhart attacked, fifty more Velocitys materialized from either side. Alice’s flanking squadrons closed the dragnet from Sorix and Sion to seal the Lion Tribe’s fate.

“Drive them toward the EM field!” Alice ordered. “Pull back the battlecruisers!”

“Squadron Leader One and Squadron Leader Two, acknowledge,” Rixby chirped in Eckhart’s ear. “Squadron Five sending urgent intelligence.”

Eckhart stiffened. “What’s up, Rixby?”

“Squadron Five pulling back,” she replied. “There’s another contingent coming in from Rulara. The Lion Tribe—they’re sending out another attack force. We can’t spring our trap. Come about, Squadrons One and Ten, and prepare to defend your rear. I repeat, incoming contingent from Rulara.”

Eckhart’s blood ran cold. He checked his readouts, but they didn’t show anything coming from Rulara. Eckhart just had to trust that Rixby knew what she was talking about.

“Break off, Squadrons One and Ten!” he ordered. “Break off and

come about!"

"What?" Innyria called back. "No! We have them on the ropes. We can drive them into the EM field."

"I said come about!" Eckhart repeated. "We've got incoming—"

The instant he said that, the signal came through and all the squadrons saw it, too. "Squadrons Two and Seven, come about!" Alice ordered. "Defend the fleet!"

"Negative, Squadron Leader Two," Rixby cut in. "Engage the Stalwarts. Hold them against the fleet and drive them toward the EM field."

"Like hell!" Alice roared. "They'll cut us in half."

"Squadrons One and Ten, break off," Rixby ordered. "Squadrons Two and Seven, reengage the Stalwarts—now!"

Eckhart's hair stood on end. He'd never heard Rixby talk like that to anyone, but he could see on his own instruments that the situation was reaching a critical point. The Lion Tribe's second contingent would be here any second.

"Coming about." He pulled his Velocity around and the rest of his squadron copied him. Innyria hesitated a moment longer, but when another ten Stalwarts and at least thirty Banshees raced up to join the battle, Innyria and his squadron followed suit, too.

The newcomers didn't waste a second. They ran straight up to Eckhart's line and opened fire.

The Stalwarts trained all their guns on Squadron One, and the Velocitys staggered. Eckhart fired as fast as he could acquire a target, but the Stalwarts overpowered him easily. The Banshees overran the squadrons in a second and started laying into Squadron Two.

Eckhart heard Alice bellowing through the communications system, but he couldn't make out what she was saying over the Datrium explosions pounding his hull.

He forced his stick forward to dive into the enemy, but the incessant bombardment drove him backward against his engines' thrust. Squadron Two Velocities passed him with their noses pointed behind him. Their shots aimed at the first Lion Tribe contingent still engaged with Aistenz's fleet, but none of the squadrons' shots seemed to land.

"Where's Squadron Five?" he yelled into his communications system. "We're getting killed out here!"

"Fall back, Squadron One!" Rixby squeaked in his ear. "Fall back

to the EM field."

"No way!" Innyria countered. "They'll drive us through the field."

"Fall back, Squadron Ten! That's an order!"

Eckhart gulped. The situation must be truly dire if Rixby was giving orders. He slacked off on his thrust and the Stalwarts doubled down on their fire. They beat Squadrons One and Ten even farther backward until all the attack squadrons blended into one confused mess.

The squadrons kept falling back until they reached the fleet line. Aistenz's battlecruisers kept up their fire, but Eckhart's heart sank when they started to retreat, too. Were they falling back on purpose or because the Lion Tribe was overpowering them?

Eckhart tore his eyes away from the fight for a second. He meant to check on Squadron Five. Bing's group should have been hiding behind Caelae, but Eckhart ended up looking down at Sorix.

The big planet loomed huge and deadly beneath the battle. Any second now, the Lion Tribe would drive all of Aistenz's fleet through the EM field.

Then Eckhart and his friends would be right back where they were when the *Marathon* crashed on this planet. They would be totally out of luck, and they wouldn't have Akkek Stratha to bail them out.

A devastating smash of guns snapped him back to high alert. He spun around to see Squadron Five streaking into view from behind Caelae, but Eckhart saw at a glance that one more squadron wouldn't make any difference.

The Lion Tribe saw it at the same moment, and two dozen Banshees split from the battle. They circled wide around the Stalwarts and wheeled around Squadron Five to surround Bing's group.

Squadron Five hurtled into the battle the way they planned, but the Banshees cut them off. Half of Bing's pilots tried to follow their plan and push the Lion Tribe toward the EM field, but they only succeeded in putting Aistenz's fleet in even more danger.

The other half of Squadron Five broke off to defend their group from the Banshees, but without the whole Squadron working together, the Banshees overran them with no trouble.

The Banshees blasted into Squadron Five and split the group even more. The Banshees angled outward to scatter the fighters and

isolate them in ones and twos.

Eckhart lost sight of Squadron Five in another flurry of plasma shots from the second contingent. They spread even wider and concentrated their power on Aistenz's battlecruisers. The squadrons tightened their formation to protect themselves, but that only made it easier for the Stalwarts to finish them off.

A punishing blast struck Eckhart's starboard flank, and his Velocity skidded sideways. It crashed into another Velocity to his port side, and his port wing exploded.

He fought the stick to hold his craft steady when a scream shot straight to his brain. He glanced to port and his heart dropped when he spotted Bing in the fighter next to him.

Bing stared down at his controls doing something as fast as his many arms could move. A plume of igniting Datrium blazed from Bing's starboard wing.

An instant later, his engine detonated and fire consumed the Velocity in a blaze of light. "Bing!" Eckhart shrieked. "Bing, no!"

Eckhart slapped his cockpit window, but he couldn't reach his friend. He clawed at his harness, but he couldn't release it. It locked him to his seat as fire consumed Bing's Velocity right in front of Eckhart's eyes.

"Bing!" he roared. "*NO*!"

Bing vanished behind a curtain of flame. Bing still floundered with his controls as the Velocity shimmered in billowing waves of Datrium—and at that moment, another brilliant flash erupted in the darkness near the EM field.

It soared out of nowhere and hung suspended in space for a second. Eckhart's eyes hurt from watching Bing's Velocity go up in flames. He didn't want to believe it when he noticed that this new light was really a black figure surrounded by throbbing rays.

It blazed for a second, and then a silent outward pulse struck every ship in the battle. It snuffed out the fire engulfing Bing's ship, and every other weapon in the field died in a heartbeat.

Eckhart watched in breathless shock as a thousand crimson tendrils snaked around each ship and manipulated them in a coordinated dance. They drew the Lion Tribe vessels forward and left Aistenz's squadrons where they were.

Eckhart glanced over at Bing's Velocity. Bing sat behind the window, not moving except to blink his eyes at the figure in the distance.

Eckhart couldn't think. His brain refused to recognize what he was seeing until the dark figure at the center of those myriad threads swelled into the unmistakable shape of a woman. It was Akkek, but Eckhart couldn't see her features through the glow around her. She only looked like a black outline.

Her fibers gathered the Lion Tribe ships into a cluster and, without warning, she flung them all through the EM field on a terminal plunge for the surface of Sorix.

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13

Dallas crouched behind the mountain peak with his back against a rock. He listened to the thump of Datrium explosions in the distance, but he didn't look out. He extended his periscope and watched Squadrons One and Ten assault Black Mountain.

He measured every shot and turn when the Lion Tribe launched its attack force and almost destroyed Innyria's Velocity before Eckhart came back to save him.

The two squadrons fell back the way they planned, and Dallas almost stood up. He ducked out of sight again when he spotted another group of Lion Tribe Stalwarts and Banshees launch to follow the first contingent. He checked his communications system, but he was too far away to contact Aistenz's fleet to alert them to the danger.

He already knew that, though. He was on his own here, and he would just have to trust Eckhart and the others to handle the Lion Tribe. Dallas had his own problems.

He kept still and ran a quick scan on the rest of Rulara. None of the Lion Tribe's security forces came after him after he landed here. No one bothered him while he made his way overland from his automated transport's crash site. Aistenz must have been right. The Lion Tribe read his transport as mechanical, and they weren't looking out for a robot.

Silence descended over Black Mountain. The security craft still crisscrossed the area, but no more shipment vessels came in to land. Eckhart and Innyria had destroyed them all—for now.

Dallas checked his timetable for the thousandth time. This was the part of the operation no one had been able to plan for. Aistenz had hired the Bloody Blossoms to finish off the Lion Tribe, but how they did it was anyone's guess. They didn't give Aistenz any details, so Dallas just had to wait and see.

How long would he have to wait? He kept thinking about the *Marathon*. The ship had been his home for years since he went to work for Eckhart. Dallas never thought he'd ever have a home again once he got his prosthetics. They separated him from the rest of humanity, and he wasn't an alien, either. He was nothing and

nobody.

Eckhart changed all that. Eckhart gave Dallas friends. He gave him something to live for. He gave him a place to belong, and Dallas never wanted to be anywhere else.

He didn't tell Eckhart, but taking the anionic elasticity quantatid had cost Dallas much more than it cost Eckhart. Dallas had to think long and hard before he summoned the courage to ask Eckhart to give it to him.

Losing the *Marathon* gave Dallas much more pause than it gave Eckhart. Dallas wasn't sure he could do anything that might make it impossible for him to return to the ship. He would rather die than face a future without the *Marathon* and its crew.

He wanted nothing more than to get this mission over with so he could get back to Aistenz's fleet, refit the quantatid to the *Marathon*, and go on with things the way they were before.

He could only do that by getting rid of both the Lion Tribe and the Bloody Blossoms. The Bloody Blossoms stood in the way, and the Lion Tribe threatened Eckhart. That on its own earned them a death sentence in Dallas' book.

He started to scan the surroundings again when he saw them. They started as tiny signals in the distance and advanced to become a tide of black across the landscape. Hundreds of Mozari converged on Black Mountain.

Dallas stiffened, watching their tentacles slither over the ground. Their mysterious bodies and beautiful faces floated above their limbs' sinuous action. They crawled toward Black Mountain and the security craft wheeled to confront them.

Dallas scanned the throng, but he couldn't pick out Ilke in the crowd. She was down there somewhere. She had to be. She wouldn't miss out on an operation like this.

Dallas sensed her presence, and he went over the modifications Rixby made to his armor and his weapons system. They might be enough to kill Mozari and to protect him from their lasers, but when it came to Ilke, he needed something more.

He needed to defeat her with his mind and heart. She weakened him—not in body, but in his mind and spirit. He could only defeat her using the same weapons. When it came to eliminating her, he had to use something stronger than Datrium.

The Bloody Blossoms flowed over the mountain and started to descend on the compound. The first security craft opened fire and

all the Bloody Blossoms erupted into their fighting forms.

Lasers blasted from their tentacles and the security craft detonated. Eckhart had left two other transmission dishes on the mountainsides and the Bloody Blossoms destroyed them, too. They cleared the landing area until only hundreds of Mozari covered the mountainsides.

They assembled there, talking to each other for a moment, and Dallas' senses prickled when he spotted Ilke for the first time. She stood at the center of the group talking to the leaders. She was spearheading this mission. So much the better. She would spearhead it straight into his guns.

The Bloody Blossoms conferred, and then ten of them separated from the others. They flared into their fighting forms with lasers flying in all directions. They spun and twirled in a blur until their lasers started chewing into the ground.

They bored downward into the mountain and carved ten identical tunnels straight into the planet.

The other Mozari leapt down the holes and vanished in a seamless flow of black. They left the mountain bare and spotless except for the destroyed remains of security craft and transmission dishes.

Dallas kept scanning the surroundings for any sign, but everything remained quiet and undisturbed. How long should he wait?

He could well imagine the mayhem going on underground. The Bloody Blossoms would leave a trail of destruction and bloodshed from one end of the compound to the other. The Lion Tribe would never see them coming, but that didn't mean anything. If anything, getting rid of the Lion Tribe would only make the Bloody Blossoms more dangerous.

Dallas drew in his periscope and headed down the mountain, away from the Lion Tribe's underground compound. He entered a desolate area of petrified forests and steep canyons.

He followed the chasms to a river cutting through the desert. A few sparse trees dotted the banks, but they didn't interest him. He kept walking until he got several miles away from the compound.

Only here did he dare to activate his jet thrusters and rocket up to the canyon's rim. He swiveled his helmet right and left, scanning the landscape. They had to be here somewhere. The Bloody Blossoms didn't travel through open space to reach Rulara. They

must have come on some kind of ship.

He still didn't find it until he fired his jet thrusters a second time and levitated above the surrounding terrain. He finally spotted them miles away. Seven Stalwarts lay tucked among some rock outcroppings where the river connected to an inland alkaline lake.

Dallas growled under his breath when he read the ships' identity signatures. Stalwarts were Regiment ships. The only ones in use by criminal elements had all been stolen and sold on the black market, but these Stalwarts still bore their Regiment identification markers.

So the Regiment was supplying the Bloody Blossoms with ships now. Did the Bloody Blossoms report to the Regiment that Aistenz had hired them to wipe out the Lion Tribe? The Regiment would definitely pony up a bunch of ships for that job.

All the more reason he had to put an end to this nightmare now before it went any further. He soared down the river, but he didn't go down to the ships. He wheeled higher into the atmosphere until he hovered miles above them.

He targeted through his helmet and aimed his fist at the cluster of ships. He fired a powerful Datrium rocket from a newly modified port Rixby had helped him fit to his prosthetic arm.

The rocket corkscrewed downward, gaining speed by the minute. The first one smashed into a Stalwart, and the mushroom cloud towered to the highest atmosphere.

He glanced back toward Black Mountain. Nothing. He let loose six more rockets, spun around, and gunned his thrusters back to the compound.

He didn't give himself a second to hesitate. If the Bloody Blossoms had any way to detect if their ships had been destroyed—which he doubted—they would react instantly. He had to get down into the compound before they got away.

He landed next to the biggest hole and jumped. He plummeted down, down, down into the dark. He had no idea where he would land or how far he would fall.

He kept scanning the walls. He couldn't see anything, but his auditory sensors picked up screams and gunshots getting louder by the second.

He brought in his rocket launchers and slotted out the new plasma jets Rixby had built for him. He held them out ready to fire at a moment's notice.

He smashed into the ground and switched on his anionic field.

Now he would find out if this thing did anything at all against the Mozari's lasers.

He swiveled from one side to the other, but he didn't see anything. The noise came from farther down a network of tunnels snaking through the mountain.

He started marching toward the noise, turned a corner, and walked into a devastating battle raging through the compound. A dozen Mozari blocked the passage, facing off against at least a hundred aliens armed with pounders.

The Mozari rotated so fast Dallas couldn't see through their lasers. Their shots hammered the walls and ceilings. They brought down showers of dust and rock, but nothing could penetrate their lasers whirling so fast.

Dallas reacted in a heartbeat and unleashed a fountain of plasma at the Mozari from behind. He incinerated five of them before they realized he was there.

The rest whirled around to attack him, only to fall to the Lion Tribe's guns. Dallas never stopped marching. He stomped up to the Lion Tribe. They hesitated when they saw the new arrival wasn't a Bloody Blossom and he attacked without mercy.

He cut them down with his assault guns and stormed over their bodies, carving his way deeper into the compound. More noise drew him to a giant cavern full to bursting with aliens from dozens of species.

At least fifty ships lined the floor. Lasers, Datrium, and rockets snaked through the cavern, chewing into the ships, the walls, the support girders holding up the roof—everything.

Hundreds of Mozari rotated in all directions, spraying lasers at everything that moved. Lasers struck Dallas' armor the instant he stepped onto the floor. He paused, taking dozens of hits on his chest and helmet, but they only bounced off. Well, what do you know? It worked after all.

The Mozari didn't see him at first. They targeted the Lion Tribe and concentrated their vengeance on anyone with a weapon. The Bloody Blossoms hunted through the cavern, spinning around the crumbling ships, slaloming through beams, rafters, and pillars, and gunning down anyone who fired at them.

Dallas measured the battle and counted the number of assailants on both sides. The Bloody Blossoms were gaining the upper hand exactly the way Aistenz predicted.

Dallas stepped forward and opened fire. He concentrated his Datrium jets on the Bloody Blossoms and saved his assault guns for the Lion Tribe.

Four Sone ducked behind a barricade near what looked like some kind of control desk. They aimed their guns out, trying to hit the Bloody Blossoms, but the Mozari's lasers blocked any shots from damaging them.

The Bloody Blossoms wheeled across the floor, decimating the desk and leaving the Sone nowhere to hide. Five Bloody Blossoms surrounded them and cut them down…until Dallas unleashed a vicious jet of plasma that torched the Bloody Blossoms on the spot.

Rockets spiraled through the cavern and smashed against Dallas' back, but he didn't turn around. He waited for the barrage to stop and, as he expected, another scatter of laser fire peppered his armor.

He turned to face his attacker and came face to face with a dozen Eitis fleeing the Bloody Blossoms. The Eitis raced toward Dallas, and the Bloody Blossoms' lasers pelted into the fleeing aliens from behind.

Dallas swung up his assault guns and opened fire. He sandwiched the Eitis between himself and the Bloody Blossoms. The Eitis went down in a carpet of bodies and left Dallas face to face with the Mozari.

Eight Mozari slowed, and their faces and bodies became visible in the center of their revolving clouds of lasers. Dallas recognized a few of Ilke's sisters…and then he saw her.

Ilke rushed up behind her sisters in the heat of battle. Her expression changed when she realized who it was, and that insidious smile spread across her beautiful face.

That smile triggered his wrath, and he unloaded a withering blast of Datrium at the Bloody Blossoms in front of him. They screamed, and the smirk vanished from Ilke's face.

Dallas charged her and ran through the burning wreckage of the Mozari he'd just killed. None of them meant anything. She was his target. She wouldn't get away from him this time.

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14

Dallas broke through the cloud of flame to find Ilke gone. More Bloody Blossoms streaked across the floor toward him. They ignored the Lion Tribe and came at him in all their howling fury. So much the better.

He planted himself in the center of the cavern, rotating one way and then the other. He barely had to target them at all. Their shrieks and the steady rattle of their firing lasers told him exactly where to shoot.

His internal processors kept a count of how many he killed, but he barely scratched the surface. There were far too many Mozari in this compound for him to kill them all here. Plenty would be rampaging in other tunnels wiping out the Lion Tribe. They wouldn't find out what he was doing until it was too late.

Another flank of Mozari hurtled out of a different tunnel. They rocketed toward him with all their lasers blazing, but their shots only bounced off his armor.

He took a step back, spraying Datrium in front of him, but he didn't try so hard to kill them all. He let them back him into a tunnel heading deeper underground, and when he crossed the threshold, he aimed his rocket launcher toward the ceiling.

The Bloody Blossoms didn't notice. They crowded closer, trying to force their lasers to penetrate his armor. They didn't seem to understand their lasers not working on someone.

More Mozari gathered in the cavern all the time. They mowed down any Lion Tribe aliens who got in their way or tried to escape. Then they spun over to join their sisters in trying to destroy Dallas.

He unloaded his rockets and they boomed into the ceiling. The last remaining support girders buckled, and tons of rock smashed down on the Bloody Blossoms.

Dallas turned and ran. He buried himself in the tunnels, laying down a carpet of fire that consumed anyone who made the mistake of coming near him.

He scanned the compound for any life signs and registered a hundred Mozari and at least five times as many other alien life signs deep underground.

He paused reading the signatures. The Lion Tribe life signs were dwindling fast. The Mozari had cornered their victims in underground catacombs and were finishing off the Lion Tribe without mercy.

Dallas froze when he noticed a single life sign winding toward them at high speed. It moved faster than anyone could run, and it was heading from the cavern directly for the massacre.

It could only be one person, and she was too far ahead for him to stop her. She would reach her sisters before he got there, and then…

He didn't have to wait long. The Mozari finished off the last of the Lion Tribe. Ilke charged into the catacombs and the Mozari reacted in seconds.

They started spinning again, but they didn't head back to the upper levels. They started tunneling straight upward. They would break the surface any second now…and then what?

They would head back to where they'd stashed their ships. They would try to leave the planet and they would find out they couldn't. Then what?

He didn't stop to think. The Bloody Blossoms didn't matter. Only one person mattered. He could let the rest go.

He fired his jet thrusters, but as he got near the catacombs, he realized he didn't have to hurry. His scanners showed him one signature still down there. Ilke was waiting for him.

His senses stretched to the breaking point. He was about to come face to face with her for the last time. Either she would walk out of here alive or he would. They couldn't both survive this. He wouldn't let them.

He landed fifty yards down the tunnel from her position and advanced slowly. He checked and rechecked the surroundings. All the Lion Tribe aliens were dead down here.

One or two Mozari remained upstairs finishing off the rest, but they would leave as soon as they received word of his attack. They would flee with their sisters, but Ilke didn't.

She stayed behind. Why? He could think of only one reason. She wanted to slow him down. She wanted to distract him so the rest of the order could get away.

She wanted to play on his feelings for her the way she always did. She knew he would come for her. She counted on his feelings to stop him from going after the rest of the order.

He didn't care about the rest of the order. He stalked into the catacombs and saw her standing still a dozen yards away. Her tentacles undulated from her body in smooth, sensual waves. Her hair danced around her head in a dark cloud. She never looked more beautiful.

She smiled at him, and her hypnotic magic made his head swim. "Hello, Dallas. You upgraded your prosthetics, I see."

He took a few more steps toward her. "Your sisters won't escape this planet, and neither will you."

She smiled even more broadly. "You won't kill me, Dallas. You love me too much. Admit it. You never stopped loving me."

"I never stopped loving you. I love you even now."

She glanced down at his arms, and he slotted his weapons back inside his armor. He crossed the last few feet and halted in front of her.

She glided toward him and her many arms surrounded him. They slithered over his armor and he felt the seamless delight of her touch. Her ripe, moist mouth hovered before his eyes.

Her deep, penetrating gaze drew him into her bottomless beauty. She rubbed her body against his armor. "I love you, Dallas," she purred. "I never stopped loving you, either. We can still be together. You can come with us. You can help us fulfill our cosmic destiny."

"That sounds…wonderful."

She leaned against him and raised her lips to his helmet. He bent down to kiss her and he slipped his arm behind her back. He pulled her in tight against him—and pinned her there.

Her expression flashed to a stark grimace of alarm, but he didn't let her go. He shot out his other hand and his fingers closed around her throat. She opened her mouth to scream, but no sound came out.

"Come on, my love," he whispered. "Let's fulfill our cosmic destiny together."

She started to struggle, but he only crushed her even more tightly against his armor. He flexed his great strength in ways he hadn't ever done since he got this mechanical body.

Her eyes darted around his face in wild desperation. She kept opening and shutting her mouth trying to draw breath, but he smashed her windpipe in a death grip.

He kept squeezing harder and harder. He didn't care anymore if

he killed her by suffocating her or by squeezing her neck completely in half. He didn't care about anything as long as she wound up dead in the end.

He checked his scanners and read her heart racing. Her brainwaves went haywire from lack of oxygen, but he held on. Her limbs whirled around him and lasers erupted from every strand of her hair.

Those lasers scored the walls and pelted his armor, but he didn't feel them. He kept staring down into those eyes, the eyes of the woman he loved. God, he hated her!

She slapped her tentacles against his armor, trying to fight her way out of his grip, but he paid no attention. Only two things occupied all his awareness—her pulse becoming erratic, and the deep black pools of her eyes.

She gaped back up at him, and he realized he didn't even recognize her. She was a curse, a disease. He didn't know her. He couldn't even remember why he ever loved her, or why he'd failed to kill her before when he had the chance.

She gave one last pathetic spasm and her heart stopped. He held onto her neck until he made sure she wasn't breathing anymore. He clamped her blood vessels off until her heart completely flatlined.

He felt exactly nothing when he dropped her body on the floor. It was finished. He didn't have to think about her ever again.

He turned away and remembered. It wasn't over yet. The Bloody Blossoms were still out there. They were on the surface searching for a way off this planet right now. He couldn't let them escape.

He retraced his steps to the tunnels the Bloody Blossoms used to escape from the compound. He fired his jet thrusters and rocketed out of the mountain. He soared into the clear sky and turned toward the river.

He streaked down it, picking up speed. He spotted the Bloody Blossoms in the distance, but they were too far ahead. Did they leave themselves an avenue of escape he didn't think of?

He flew as fast as he could, but they were too close. They rushed to the spot where they left their Stalwarts. They halted there and started to turn. Where were they going? What were they deciding?

Dallas plunged into the chasm and rushed up the river to reach them. He slotted out his weapons to put an end to them when he heard it. A howling shriek of engine noise erupted from beyond the horizon. It was the unmistakable sound of ships in flight. The

Bloody Blossoms were getting away!

He hurtled out of the chasm and took a second to realize that all the Bloody Blossoms were still standing on the same spot. They spun around to defend themselves against him, but at that moment, three shiny new Velocitys vaulted over the far mountains and plunged toward the ground.

All three opened fire on the Bloody Blossoms, and Dallas' helmet read their signatures. *Squadron Leader One. Squadron Leader Two. Squadron Leader Ten.*

Dallas cut his jet thrusters and descended to the ground. He still aimed his weapons at the Bloody Blossoms, but he didn't have to shoot. The three Velocitys spun around the Bloody Blossoms, bombarding them with countless shots.

The Mozari opened fire, but they couldn't penetrate the Velocitys' shields. The ships revolved around the cluster of Bloody Blossoms cutting them down until not a single one remained.

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15

The three Velocitys descended to the ground and Eckhart grinned at Dallas through the cockpit window. Dallas lowered his arms and retracted his weapons inside his prosthetics, but his mind spun in turmoil. What could he say to Eckhart? How could Dallas express his gratitude and happiness that his friends had come back for him?

Eckhart sprang down to the ground, followed by Alice and Innyria. Alice hefted a huge pounder and swept it across the scorched earth where the Bloody Blossoms used to be, but there was nothing left.

Eckhart strode over to Dallas and laid his hand on Dallas' shoulder. "You okay?"

Dallas nodded. "I didn't think you'd come. I thought you'd be too busy with the battle."

"We thought you might need some help…but I can see you had it all under control." Eckhart cast an appreciative glance toward what was left of the Stalwarts.

"Thank you, Eckhart," Dallas murmured. "You don't know what this means."

"I have a pretty good idea." Eckhart squinted up the river. "What's the situation at the compound?"

"It's all finished." Dallas caught Eckhart shooting him a questioning look. "All of it."

Eckhart squeezed Dallas' shoulder again. That squeeze felt so much more comforting and meaningful than all of Ilke's caresses. "Let's get over there and make sure. We'll meet you there."

Eckhart, Alice, and Innyria climbed back into their Velocitys and flew back to the compound. Dallas rose into the atmosphere and scanned the ground for hundreds of miles in all directions. There wasn't a single Mozari life sign anywhere. It really was over.

He sailed back to the compound and landed next to his friends. "How do we get in?" Eckhart asked.

"Down these holes. The Bloody Blossoms drilled them to get inside."

Alice stalked over to Eckhart and seized him by the collar. "You're with me, Eckhart."

“Hey!” He tried to fight his way out of her grip. “Leave me alone.”

“Earthlings need special treatment. Now keep still or I might drop you down the hole.”

She leapt off and dragged Eckhart, kicking and screaming all the way. Eckhart’s protests and Alice’s curses dwindled as they descended out of hearing.

Innyria chuckled. “Thank goodness I’m not an Earthling.”

“Eckhart is an honorary alien,” Dallas replied. “He was born on the fringes.”

Innyria burst out laughing. “He must be an alien if he hangs around with freaks like us, huh?” Innyria jumped down the hole before Dallas could answer.

Dallas sprang down after them and found Eckhart straightening his shirt and scowling at Alice. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“How the hell were you going to get down here otherwise?” she snarled. “You’d break your neck jumping down there.”

“Dallas could have brought me.”

“You might want to rethink that,” Dallas told him. “I might not have been any more considerate than she was.”

Eckhart snorted. “Remind me not to help you again.”

Dallas laughed. He was starting to feel much, much better—better than he had felt since he’d reconnected with Ilke on Zuic 7HP9.

Alice turned away and trained her sightless eye sockets at the tunnels around her. “Do you hear anything, Dallas?”

“I don’t hear anything,” Innyria replied.

“Is your name Dallas?” Alice hissed.

“I don’t hear anything, either,” Dallas replied. Then he paused. “Do you *see* that?”

“What is it?” Eckhart asked. “Is anyone down here?”

Alice didn’t reply. She inched down the tunnel and stopped. She stared at the wall.

“There’s nothing here,” Innyria ventured.

“You’re wrong.” Dallas trained his sensors on the wall Alice was staring at. “There’s an EM field protecting this wall. I didn’t notice it before. I was a little busy with…everything else.”

“What’s an EM field doing here?” Eckhart asked.

“Stand back.” Alice lowered her pounder and aimed it at the wall.

“Is that wise?” Innyria asked.

Alice tightened her grip on her weapon, but Dallas stopped her. “No—not a pounder. The field will deflect it back at us. That’s exactly why it’s here.”

“Is it protecting something?” Eckhart asked.

“That’s the problem,” Dallas replied. “We can’t see through it. If I had to guess, I’d say the field is designed to stop anyone from detecting whatever’s behind it. It isn’t necessarily there to stop anyone from breaking in.”

“Can you get inside?” Eckhart asked.

“Hold it,” Innyria asked. “The Lion Tribe could have used this to hide their members. We could be walking into a whole crowd of armed Lion Tribe fighters waiting to gun us down.”

“All the more reason we have to get inside. I came here to get rid of the last of the Lion Tribe. If any of them is behind this wall, I have to deal with them.” Dallas pushed the other three farther up the tunnel. “Stand over there. I’ll handle this.”

Eckhart, Innyria, and Alice retreated out of range. Dallas read the EM field and the anionic elasticity quantatid adjusted the frequency of the Datrium feed to his plasma jets.

He took aim and opened up his jets. The blasts scorched the wall and melted the rock. The field wavered, but it didn’t give. His sensors read the fluctuating frequency and the quantatid matched the field until it snapped.

He cut the jets and stared through the melted opening. The rock on either side smoked and clouded his vision, but when it cleared, he almost didn’t believe what he was seeing.

Dozens of people packed the interior, but they weren’t armed and they didn’t attack. The prisoners didn’t even notice when someone had freed them.

Eckhart stepped in front of Dallas and stuck his head inside. He whipped it out just as fast and grimaced. “Phew! It stinks in there.”

“What’s going on?” Innyria asked, and did the same thing. “Christ! What the hell?”

“They’re starving,” Alice rasped through her mask. “They’re all malnourished, and most of them are suffering from respiratory burns from inhaling the fumes.”

“Jesus!” Eckart whispered. “This is bad! Take down the rest of the wall, Dallas. Work your way down from here and open it all up. Get some air inside.”

“What are you going to do?” Innyria asked.

“I’m going in there.” Eckhart swung his leg into the breach. “I’m going to see what makes these people so important to the Lion Tribe.”

He climbed through and Innyria and Alice followed him. Dallas fired up his plasma jets and melted the rest of the wall.

The hidden chamber ended thirty feet away from where he and Alice first noticed it, but the prisoners inside still didn’t react. They didn’t run out to enjoy their freedom.

They huddled on the floor hugging themselves, and some didn’t even sit up anymore. The stench started to dissipate now that air got into the chamber, but none of the prisoners even looked up.

“Hell!” Innyria murmured. “What did the Lion Tribe want with these people? Why did they hide them in here?”

“They must be important somehow,” Eckhart remarked.

“They come from random races,” Dallas pointed out. “They don’t belong to any one species.”

“They aren’t Lion Tribe,” Alice added. “The Lion Tribe would never treat its own like this.”

“We can’t leave them here,” Eckhart decided. “I’m going back to my Velocity. I’ll contact Rixby. Aistenz can decide what to do with these people. If they were important enough for the Lion Tribe to imprison them here, maybe Aistenz can find out why.”

He started to walk away. Dallas continued down the line of prisoners. His sensors picked up the species and original homeworld of each person. “Eckhart!” he yelled.

“Huh?”

“Come here.” Dallas struggled to keep his voice steady. “Hurry.”

Eckhart came back and stopped next to Dallas. “What’s the matter?”

“Look.”

Eckhart followed Dallas’ gaze to a prisoner huddled in the corner. Several other aliens surrounded the man, and he was so dirty and bruised that Dallas could hardly recognize him. He probably wouldn’t have noticed this man at all if his sensors didn’t identify the prisoner’s species as something so unusual that Dallas couldn’t ignore it.

Earthling.

Eckhart squatted down and took hold of the man’s jacket by both shoulders. He tried to turn the prisoner around to face him,

but the prisoner fought him off. He kept twisting his face to the wall.

“Clifton!” Eckhart cried. “Clifton, it’s me! It’s Eckhart!”

Clifton didn’t answer. He didn’t turn around. He pretended not to hear, but Dallas detected Clifton’s heart rate quickening. He definitely realized what was going on.

“Clifton! I thought you were dead!” Eckhart cast a hasty glance around. “Where’s DeWalt?”

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WAR DEAD

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1

Four Velocity-class fighter craft wheeled out of the atmosphere and came screaming in close to the ground. They unleashed their guns on five freighters parked over the planet Rulara's Black Mountain compound.

"Bring it around to the west, Squadron Leader Five," Adam Eckhart called.

"All over it," his friend Bing replied.

The freighters opened fire, and their lasers sliced back and forth across the sky. They traced Bing's trajectory as he and another ten Velocities wheeled hard to the left to circle Black Mountain.

"You're with me, Squadron Leader Two," Eckhart ordered.

"Right with you," Eckhart's Bion pilot Alice rasped from the next Velocity in line.

Eckhart and Alice hurtled in a steep curve and streaked over the ground to rocket closer to the freighters. The four behemoths hugged the planet, spitting lasers in all directions. They rarely missed their targets.

Eckhart and Alice unloaded on them, with fifteen more of their squadron fighters hot on their heels. They blasted the freighters chewing into their hulls, but the giant ships still didn't budge.

The three squadrons raced past Black Mountain, taking dozens of hits, but the Velocities flew too fast to suffer much damage. The squadrons rocketed away, and all four freighters rotated on the spot to gun them down.

"Now, Squadron Leader Five!" Eckhart yelled.

"Surprise!" Bing cheered as he and the rest of Squadron Five blasted over the mountain from the west.

They unleashed hell on the freighters, and one of them exploded in a hail of gunfire. Cheers went up from the squadrons following Eckhart, and he brought his fighter back around for another pass.

"That's what I'm talking about!" Dallas Eldridge crowed from the seat behind Alice. "Come on, Squadron One Alpha! You're missing out here."

At his word, another squadron charged in with guns on fire. Innyria's squadron streaked past Bing's crew and pounded the

remaining freighters from behind.

Another one detonated in flame. That left two. “All in!” Eckhart ordered. “Give ‘em a little taste of how we do things on the *Marathon*.”

“That’s what I’ve been waiting for!” Alice husked, and Squadron Two dove for the freighters.

The rest of the squadrons veered hard, and converged on Black Mountain from all sides. All trace of formation or order vanished as every Velocity opened up at once. The remaining squadrons surrounded the freighters, flying in such wild, random patterns that the freighters’ guns couldn’t keep up.

Eckhart trained all his attention on the freighter nearest him. He couldn’t even see the other one with both Alice’s and Innyria’s squadrons burying it in gunfire. Smoke and venting plasma obscured it in a curtain of sparks and flashes.

Eckhart slammed his controls hard to port and cut quick, tight circles around the freighter. Its lasers spat everywhere, but he kept his Velocity moving at top speed to stay out of their way.

He pounded the freighter with all his firepower, only altering course to avoid colliding with his squadron members. “Get out, Squadron Leader One!” Bing yelled in Eckhart’s ear. “It’s about to blow!”

Eckhart yanked his helm back to starboard and pulled out of the battle just as the freighter boomed in a deafening shockwave of noise and energy. The blast hurtled most of the Velocities away, and Eckhart’s fighter spun clear.

He paused in the atmosphere and looked down at Black Mountain. Two spheres of debris spun over the compound where the freighters used to be. Alice, Innyria, and Bing led their squadrons clear of the mayhem, and the friends reassembled in the atmosphere.

“I guess they were the last stragglers,” Innyria replied. “That’s the end of the Lion Tribe. I never thought I’d live to see the end of that gang.”

“If there are any more stragglers out there,” Alice added, “they won’t be able to stand against us. It’s finished.”

“We might as well go back to the Dothea system,” Eckhart ordered. “We’ll rendezvous with Aistenz Trotaer’s fleet, and we’ll finally be free. We can go wherever we want without worrying about the Lion Tribe coming after us.”

“Congratulations, Squadron Leader One,” Innyria told him. “It must feel pretty good after twenty years of running and hiding from them.”

Eckhart smiled to himself. It did feel pretty good not to have to constantly look over his shoulder for the next enemy hunting for him.

He’d pulled his Velocity away from Rulara when Bing’s shrill voice set Eckhart’s hair on end. “Not so fast, people! We got company, and not the good kind.”

Eckhart looked down at the instruments, and his blood ran cold when his readouts showed him ten giant Colossus-class battleships crawling toward Rulara, with at least twenty smaller Banshee-class fighters.

“What the hell do they want?” Alice hissed through her gas mask.

“Aren’t they supposed to enforce the law and keep order on the fringes?” Innyria asked.

“This is no time for jokes!” Dallas cut in. “What do you want to do, Squadron Leader One?”

“Fall back to Aistenz’s fleet,” Eckhart replied. “We don’t want to mess with the United Collateral Regiment.”

The whole group wheeled away from Rulara, and Eckhart put on speed to get as far from the Regiment as possible. The Lion Tribe might have been out to kill him, but they never struck terror into Eckhart’s heart like the Regiment did.

He raced out of the system on a dead course for the Dothea system, but no matter how fast he flew, the Regiment kept gaining. “What the hell is the matter with them?” Innyria asked. “Why are they so hot to enforce the law now?”

“Don’t you know?” Alice replied. “They have reciprocal arrangements with every criminal organization on the fringes. They’re coming in to take revenge on the people who killed their friends.”

“Are you sure they’re out to avenge the Lion Tribe?” Dallas asked. “They had a deal with the Bloody Blossoms, too. Which one do they want to avenge?”

“Probably both,” Eckhart replied. “Here they come! Stand by to defend yourselves!”

The words barely left his mouth before the Banshees streaked forward and overran the squadrons. Blasts and booms rocked

Eckhart's ship, and he skidded backward to fire into their midst.

The Colossuses couldn't fly as fast, but they could still shoot. They rained gunfire into the squadrons. Eckhart had to fly at his fastest just to dodge their shots.

The Banshees plunged into the squadrons, firing fast and sure. Velocities exploded on all sides.

"Pull back to the fleet!" Eckhart ordered. "We can't beat them."

"To hell with that!" Alice punched her throttle to engage the Banshees, but she only ended up flying headfirst into the Colossuses' fire.

"Break off!" Eckhart yelled. "Lead them to the fleet! Get out of there, Alice!"

Eckhart and Bing pulled away, but Alice's charge got her caught in the swarm of Banshees. She couldn't escape.

"Go on, Squadron Leader One!" Innyria told Eckhart. "I'll get her out."

"No way." Eckhart pulled his fighter back around. "Let's go, Squadron Leader Five. Alice needs a babysitter."

Bing laughed. "Just wait till I tell the rest of the *Marathon* crew about this!"

"You bastards!" Alice bellowed through the communications system, but Eckhart couldn't see her anymore with the hail of Banshee gunfire targeting her squadron.

He hurtled into reverse, shooting every Banshee in his path. Bing and Innyria turned their squadrons to the other side. The squadrons formed a knot around the Banshees to draw their fire away from Alice and her squadron.

Her Velocity erupted from the swarm, and the tight formation of fighters took off into black space. "Retreat!" Eckhart ordered. "Beat it out of here, all of you!"

The squadrons broke away, but the Banshees tracked their every move. The Banshees drove their engines to the wall and hounded the fighters every inch of the way back to the Dothea system.

Eckhart had to seriously concentrate on flying instead of returning their fire, but getting into a full-scale battle against the Regiment would only get him and his friends killed faster.

"Battlecruiser *Atera* Command to Squadron Leader One," a familiar voice chirped in his ear. "Looks like you picked up a case of space fleas on your trip."

Eckhart laughed in relief when he heard Rixby's voice. "Can you

help us out with that, darling?"

"Arming the fleet now," Rixby replied. "Bring 'em in. We'll gas the bastards for you."

"You heard the lady, Squadrons Two and Five. Head for the *Atera*."

The moment Eckhart entered the Dothea system, his controls showed the giant battlecruisers of Aistenz Trotaer's fleet powering up their Triorium drives. The Banshees realized the ruse first, but they were already too close to save themselves.

Eckhart gunned his engines and punched through the fleet line as every battlecruiser opened fire. He and the rest of the squadrons vanished behind curtains of fire that enveloped the Banshees in explosions.

Eckhart wheeled hard and aimed his fighter for the *Atera*'s open hatch. He gunned it inside as the Colossuses thundered into the Dothea system and the whole world erupted in a raging space battle.

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2

Eckhart's Velocity skidded to a halt, and he hopped to the ground. Deafening concussions rocked the battlecruiser all around him.

Mechanics, fighter pilots, and random personnel from dozens of species raced all over the landing platform. Some scrambled more Velocities to join the battle, but most of the crew worked non-stop to secure anything not already tied down.

The *Atera* pitched and rocked as the noise escalated to thunderclaps. Another Bion raced over to Eckhart and yelled in his ear, but Eckhart couldn't make out any words.

Aistenz Trotaer's majordomo Squids gesticulated wildly, and Eckhart pointed behind him to his Velocity, but neither he nor Squids could make themselves heard.

Squids tugged Eckhart's arm. Eckhart didn't want to leave, but it didn't look like he had any choice.

Squids towed him over to the elevator, and the doors shut out the noise. The walls still resounded with muffled booms coming from all sides, but at least Eckhart and Squids could hear each other here.

"I need your help, Squids," Eckhart began. "We found something at Black Mountain. It's sensitive. I think the Lion Tribe might have been—"

"Excuse me for interrupting, but this is an emergency," Squids cut in. "I need you to come up to the command center immediately. I need you to take over running this battle until we clear the Regiment from the system."

Eckhart's jaw dropped. "Me! Why do you want *me* to do it?"

"You have the most experience fighting the Regiment. You have the most experience fighting anybody. Please, Eckhart. I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important. The survival of the whole fleet depends on you."

"That's impossible!" Eckhart exclaimed. "This is Aistenz Trotaer's fleet. How can *I* be the most experienced in all of Aistenz's service? I'm nobody. I'm just a mercenary."

"Please, Eckhart," Squids begged again. "I'll explain everything to you. I promise, but right now, we need an experienced captain in

charge of the *Atera*. Please just finish this battle against the Regiment, and I'll explain everything afterward. I swear it."

Eckhart passed his hand across his eyes. "All right. If you really want me to."

Squids grabbed his hand. "Thank you! You're a lifesaver."

Eckhart squinted sideways at the old Bion, but he didn't argue. He found it impossible to believe that Aistenz Trotaer, one of the most powerful criminal overlords in the galaxy, if not *the* most powerful, didn't have someone in this fleet better qualified than Eckhart to take over.

Eckhart didn't have time to think about that. The elevator doors opened and he stepped out into the *Atera*'s command center. He'd only been in here a few times, and his heart lifted when he spotted Rixby standing on a control station in front of the command podium.

"What do you have for me, sweetie?" Eckhart asked.

Rixby acted like she didn't hear him. She waddled back and forth across her station, snapping orders right and left. She stepped on her instruments, jabbed them with her fingers, and read streams of information running across dozens of screens.

"Gunners fourteen through seventy-five, target Colossus eighty-seven-forty-eight. Fire at will! *Paostea* Command, bring your ship four hundred and twenty-four degrees ascendent, eighty-two degrees latitude. Target Colossus thirty-nine-sixty-five and fire."

Eckhart stepped onto the podium and checked the readouts flowing in front of him. The other command center workers raced to keep up with Rixby's orders and the readings she sent back and forth from one station to another.

She worked a thousand times faster here than Eckhart had ever seen her act on the *Marathon*. Information streamed past her antennae faster than Eckhart could read it, but she never once broke off.

He didn't know what to do with himself until another panel blinked alive in front of him. "Captain on the bridge!" she squealed. "*Atera* active!"

"What?" Eckhart asked.

"Bring the *Atera* about!" Rixby shrilled. "We're dead in the water without a pilot. Get us out of the firing line to lead the Colossuses deeper into the system."

He realized a moment too late what she was talking about. His

eye snapped from one display to another in front of him and he realized what she wanted him to do. The helm and throttle controls reverted to his podium. The *Atera* couldn't move without someone actually piloting the ship.

He seized the controls, and the giant ship reacted instantly. Piloting a ship this big felt strange after his many years on the *Marathon*, but the *Atera* didn't let him down.

He slammed the engines into reverse and Rixby went wild. "All ships, Shika formation around the *Atera*! Execute!"

The rest of Aistenz's fleet responded without a moment's hesitation. They twirled on the spot, still trading heavy fire with the Regiment. The fleet retreated deeper into the Dothea system, and the Regiment followed.

Eckhart steered the *Atera* into a complicated flight pattern, dodging and weaving from one Colossus to another. They couldn't move nearly as fast, but their weapons outmatched Aistenz's battlecruisers easily. Regiment shots pounded the *Atera*'s hull, and Eckhart's instruments registered damage on all decks.

"Seventeen hundred megameters from the EM field!" Rixby squeaked. "Brogor formation, execute!"

Eckhart had a split second to read the instructions she transmitted to his readouts. He hit the throttle and the *Atera* streaked between two Colossuses. A trick like that would have been a day at the park for the *Marathon,* but the battlecruiser was too damn big to pull it off.

The *Atera*'s massive sides crashed against both Colossuses, and spine-chilling screeches of metal on metal set Eckhart's teeth on edge. Rixby screamed, but the next second, the *Atera* crashed through on the other side, along with the other cruisers from Aistenz's fleet.

"Wheel!" Rixby ordered. "Full spin!"

Eckhart hauled the *Atera* into a full turn to face backward. Now the whole Regiment force stood between Aistenz's fleet and the EM field blocking off more than half of the Dothea system.

"Now!" Eckhart ordered.

"Triorium drive active!" Rixby called. "All ships active!"

The Regiment opened fire to bombard the fleet with every gun, but when their shots struck the *Atera*, the blasts rebounded and smashed the Colossuses backward. They staggered and pitched across the EM field.

Eckhart relaxed as every Regiment ship went dark, cold, and lifeless. They rotated in midair as the planet Sorix's gravity dragged them down.

The Colossuses got smaller and smaller as they fell through the atmosphere to the surface far below. Whether their crews survived didn't matter anymore. No power system could make it through the EM field. None of those ships would ever get off the planet without power.

Rixby brought Eckhart back to the present. "Is it true? Did you find Clifton on Rulara?"

"Yeah." Eckhart shook himself. "I gotta go. Can you keep things under control here, Rixby?"

"Yes. You don't have to worry. We just needed a pilot."

Eckhart took one more look around the command center. Aistenz Trotaer could afford the most highly skilled people in the galaxy. He didn't need a damn pilot. Something weird was going on here, but Eckhart didn't stick around to find out what it was.

He would have interrogated Squids, but Eckhart didn't see Squids anywhere, either. He stepped back into the elevator and went down to the landing platform where he'd left the rest of the *Marathon* crew.

He stepped out onto the floor, and his heart seized up when he saw the *Marathon* parked to one side. The ship had been completely repaired and was ready to fly again. Aistenz had promised to restore the *Marathon*, but Eckhart didn't expect it to happen this fast.

He walked over to Dallas, who was climbing down from Alice's Velocity. "You okay?"

"Yes," Dallas replied. "Rixby is sending me instructions through my helmet for disconnecting the anionic elasticity quantatid from my systems. You'll be able to reconnect it to the *Marathon*. The ship will be as good as ever."

"Maybe you should keep it. We can get another quantatid somewhere else."

"Are you sure?" Dallas asked. "Rixby seems to think it won't be as easy as that."

"I'll ask Aistenz. He'll know where to get one without too much trouble."

"Only if you're sure," Dallas repeated.

"I'm sure. If the quantatid makes you impervious to laser fire,

you should probably keep it."

A commotion interrupted their conversation. Both men glanced toward the noise, and Eckhart shot forward when piercing shrieks broke out near his own Velocity.

He went over there, but he couldn't get near the ship with so many people crowding the ship. Bing scurried around at least twenty of Aistenz's people, trying to pull someone out of Eckhart's Velocity.

Blake Clifton cut a startling contrast to the clean-cut, polished, professional businessman that Eckhart and the *Marathon* crew had first met on OSMZ. Instead of an expensive suit, Clifton wore greasy rags that hid an emaciated frame.

No trace remained of his muscular chest and shoulders. Now all his ribs and collarbones showed through paper-thin skin. The biggest change lingered in his hollow, sunken eye sockets. His eyes darted from one side to the other without ever meeting anyone near him, not even people he knew well.

Aistenz's crew climbed up ladders to the Velocity's cockpit and tried to haul Clifton from his seat. Clifton shrieked and kicked and fought, but his skeletal body couldn't do much, especially when a big Vaatune got up there to help.

His screeches reached an epic pitch when the *Atera* crew finally lifted him completely out of the cockpit and passed him hand over hand to the floor. Bing moved in, but Clifton fought so hard that he actually managed to break away from the crewmen holding him.

Clifton whirled backward and broke into a run, but he was so out of his mind that he didn't see where he was going. He slammed face-first into the Velocity's landing gear and toppled flat on the floor, out cold.

Bing rested his many limbs on the floor and panted for breath. "This is not good."

Eckhart stepped in and waved to Aistenz's people. "I'll take over from here. You can go."

"Our orders from the command center were to take him to the medical bay," one of them replied.

"You leave that to me. I'll straighten it out. You don't have to worry. Go on. He's no danger to himself or anyone else."

Aistenz's crew retreated reluctantly and finally left Eckhart alone with Clifton and Bing. "What do you want to do with him?" Bing asked. "He's out of his mind."

“I bet you he isn’t so out of his mind that he can’t tell us what happened to DeWalt.” Eckhart picked up Clifton in his arms. Clifton’s once burly frame weighed almost nothing. “Come with me, Bing. He’ll probably need some Eplite.”

“He needs a few ration packs, if you ask me,” Bing muttered, but he followed Eckhart over to the *Marathon*.

Eckhart carried Clifton into the ship’s infirmary and put Clifton on one of the two exam tables. Bing spat two wads of Eplite into Clifton’s mouth and crossed to his medical equipment.

Bing started to unwind some electrodes to check Clifton’s vitals when Clifton shot off the bed in a flash. He gasped and jerked right and left, looking wildly in all directions.

He relaxed only slightly when he spotted Eckhart. Then Clifton saw Bing, and Clifton immediately looked away. He hunched his shoulders, huddled into a ball, and stared resolutely at the wall.

“Do you remember who I am, Clifton?” Eckhart asked. “I’m Adam Eckhart. I found you and DeWalt on OSMZ. Do you remember? I got you away from the Regiment when you were both locked up on Kukuri.”

Clifton didn’t turn around. He kept his head turned as far as it would go so Eckhart couldn’t see his face.

“We found you imprisoned behind a wall in the Lion Tribe’s headquarters compound,” Eckhart went on. “We want to help you. You’re safe now. You’re on the *Marathon*. Do you remember the *Marathon*?”

No answer. Eckhart glanced over at Bing, and Bing shrugged; he didn’t move, though. Clifton and DeWalt had come on board the *Marathon* as virulently alien-hating as anyone from the Earth solar system could be. Whatever happened to Clifton might have triggered those feelings again.

In fact, Eckhart would be very surprised if it didn’t. The Lion Tribe was made up of nothing but aliens. Whoever had done this to Clifton must have been an alien—or several.

No one could be more brutal than aliens. Eckhart knew that firsthand. Not even the Regiment could be as cruel.

Eckhart studied the back of Clifton’s head. Every bone stuck out down Clifton’s spine, running down his neck. Eckhart had to get through to him somehow.

“Give us a minute, will you, buddy?” Eckhart murmured to Bing.

“You bet. You know where to find me.”

Bing sloped out of the infirmary. Now it was just Eckhart and Clifton, two Earthlings alone together—possibly the only Earthlings for millions of parsecs in any direction.

Eckhart pulled a chair over to the other side of the exam table. He put it where Clifton could see him, sat down, and crossed one ankle onto his knee. Eckhart reclined back and relaxed, but he didn't take his gaze off Clifton.

"There," Eckhart began. "He's gone. It's just us. We're both human here. You know me, Clifton. Nothing will happen to you here. I won't let any of the alien freaks come near you."

Clifton blinked in a way that told Eckhart that the man heard him. He was making progress.

"You're a soldier, Clifton. You were a captain in the Regiment before you retired and went to work for DeWalt. You've been in combat before. This is just another battle, Clifton. You've been behind enemy lines, but you're back now. You're back in friendly territory and I'm your commanding officer, trying to debrief you. I need to know what happened to you and DeWalt after we lost you on Pheste. Do you remember that? Do you remember the explosion on Pheste? DeWalt was in the hospital with a body temperature spiking off the charts. You stayed with him. You refused to leave him, and then—"

Clifton's eyes snapped to Eckhart's face and immediately dodged away. He remembered.

Eckhart almost said something else when Clifton opened his mouth, but no sound came out. Clifton checked himself, looked away, and tried again, but he still couldn't make a sound. Whatever had happened after Pheste must have been really bad, but Eckhart already knew that.

Eckhart stood up. He sauntered closer to the bed and planted himself right in front of Clifton. He lowered his voice to a hushed murmur, not that anyone else could hear him.

"Where is he, Clifton? Where's DeWalt?"

Clifton gulped. He kept his head bowed and turned away so his eyes didn't come close to meeting Eckhart's. Clifton struggled for a few more seconds and finally croaked out, "Regiment."

Eckhart stared at him, and the bottom dropped out of his stomach. Damn it! Getting caught by the Lion Tribe and sealed inside a wall was bad enough, but this?

The whole horrible scenario crystalized in Eckhart's mind and it

made him sick. So the Regiment had gotten their filthy hands on DeWalt again, and that could only mean one thing.

The *Marathon* crew had robbed the Regiment of every other weapon the Regiment wanted to use to annihilate the fringe aliens. Eckhart had taken Akkek Stratha and her friends from the Silvercloud Vault. Dallas had wiped out the Bloody Blossoms on Rulara.

Only DeWalt remained. If the Regiment got him back, they could do anything with him. Eckhart didn't even understand how the Regiment planned to use DeWalt as a weapon against the fringe aliens, but Eckhart knew someone who did know.

Eckhart fought himself under control. He had to move quickly, but he had to take care of Clifton first.

"Come with me, Clifton. I'm going to take you somewhere safe—somewhere you can get all the food and water you need and somewhere you won't see any aliens." Clifton's head shot up and he met Eckhart's gaze for the first time. "Come on. You're safe here."

Clifton slid off the exam table. He walked hunched over and limped, but at least he could still walk.

Eckhart led Clifton down the gangway to his own quarters. He opened the door and led Clifton into the simple cabin. "Stay here. Keep the door shut and help yourself to anything you can find to eat. It's all over there." Eckhart pointed to the rations cupboard in the corner. "I'll be back later to check on you. No one will bother you here." He pointed to the bunk. "You might want to get some sleep while you're at it—and you can help yourself to any of my clothes. They're under the bunk. See you later."

Eckhart shut the door and drew in a long shaky breath. This changed everything. All the freedom and relief he felt at eliminating the Lion Tribe meant nothing compared to this.

He would never be able to rest until he found DeWalt and recaptured the banker from the Regiment. No one on the fringe would be safe until he did.

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3

Eckhart headed for the *Marathon*'s bridge with his mind in a whirl. He had to track down DeWalt, and for that, he needed Rixby.

Eckhart would have his work cut out for him prying her out of Aistenz's clutches. Aistenz didn't let go of good people once he got his hands on them.

Eckhart couldn't forget the way she'd acted at the command center. She acted like she belonged there—almost as though her years on the *Marathon* had been holding her back all this time. What if she didn't want to leave the *Atera*? What would Eckhart do without her?

He had bigger fish to fry right now. He stepped onto the bridge to find Alice at her station. She had her back to him, and didn't turn around when he sat down in his own seat.

He checked the regulators. All the ship's systems were working at their optimum. Of course they were. Aistenz's crew didn't do anything half-assed. The *Marathon* also had full loads of Celdian and Datrium, along with a new anionic elasticity quantatid. It was ready to fly anywhere and take on any enemy.

He switched over to Regiment records for those stations nearest to Rulara, but he already knew he wouldn't find any trace of DeWalt. Wherever the banker was, the Regiment would have erased all record of DeWalt's existence.

DeWalt no longer existed except in the memories of those who knew him. Was DeWalt even still alive? He had to be. He would be useless to the Regiment otherwise.

Eckhart scanned the *Atera* for any sign of Akkek Stratha. He wasn't surprised when he didn't find any. She could disappear anywhere.

He almost got up to leave, but he paused when Alice turned her chair around. She fixed her sightless, empty eye sockets on him, and her breathing became even raspier and more labored through her gas mask. "I have something to say to you, Eckhart."

"Okay. Go ahead and say it."

"I told you before that I wouldn't go into Aistenz's service. I helped you get out of the Silvercloud Vault, and I helped you on

Pheste."

"I know, and I'm grateful for all your help."

"I know what you're planning to do," she hissed. "If you go into Aistenz's service—or, I should say, if you *stay* in Aistenz's service—I'm leaving. I won't stay here. You said you wouldn't try to make me stay, and I'll hold you to your word."

Eckhart opened his mouth and stopped himself. He *had* given Alice his word that he wouldn't stand in her way if she decided to leave. He just hated to see her go, especially now.

He'd also promised her that getting Akkek out of the Silvercloud Vault would be the last and only job the *Marathon* ever did for Aistenz Trotaer. Was he really ready to go back on those promises, too?

He took a deep breath. "I won't stop you from leaving. I understand how you feel about Aistenz."

"But?" she prompted.

He shrugged. "There is no but. I made you a promise, and I'll keep it."

"How can you even think about working for him?" she snarled. "How can you throw away your freedom to become a pet on a leash for that…that fiend?"

Eckhart focused on his regulators so he wouldn't see her staring at him. He'd never dreamed this would be so hard. "Maybe some things are more important to me than freedom."

"Like what? You've been a mercenary all your life. If you wanted to lick his ass, you could have done that the first day after you left Parilia."

"I was just a kid then. I didn't understand the universe. Maybe if I had known, I would have been working for him all along. I don't know. Either way, I don't expect you to work for him. I envy you that you could leave so easily. I wish I could."

"What is wrong with you?" she hissed. "How can you betray everything we worked for all these years?"

"Which is what, exactly? What have we been working for all these years besides a handful of chips and another load of Datrium?"

"We worked for our independence. We worked so we could make our own destiny without him or any of the others telling us what to do."

"Well, everyone changes. Maybe I'm changing, too, but you

don't have to. You can go. I'll give you a share of the funds that Aistenz gave me. You can buy your own ship. You can go anywhere you want and no one will stop you, least of all me."

She stared at him for so long that he made up his mind again to leave, but she cut in on his thoughts by hissing even more menacingly. "I hate you, Eckhart."

He bit back a grin. "I love you, too. I gotta go. See me before you leave, okay? Don't just disappear without saying goodbye."

He walked out fighting down annoyance. Why should he be annoyed with her for wanting to stay out of this? He wanted to stay out of it himself, but he couldn't. It was way too late in the day for that.

He stepped out onto the landing platform. He had to get back to the command center. He had to convince Rixby to stop working on Aistenz's battlecruisers and help him, maybe for the last time.

Eckhart wouldn't be able to use Rixby's knowledge anymore if she decided to leave, too. He could think of a whole lot of advantages he would prefer not to lose in his life, but he had difficulty thinking of one he would prefer to lose less than that one.

What about the others—Bing, or Dallas? Eckhart never would have expected that any situation would arise where his whole crew would abandon him. He'd always operated in the rock-solid assurance that they would follow him anywhere. Now that assurance was gone.

He headed for the elevator. The doors opened before he got there, and Squids stepped out. "Perfect," Eckhart exclaimed. "Just the man I was looking for. I need to find Akkek Stratha. Where is she?"

Squids stared at him. "Akkek? She's gone. I thought you knew."

"Gone!" Eckhart practically screamed. "When? Where did she go?"

"She left right after she defeated the Lion Tribe in the battle. She fulfilled her obligation to Aistenz and she left. We couldn't exactly stop her, could we?"

"Where is she? Where did she go?"

"She said something about going to Imeliv H8. Something about having unfinished business there."

"Shit!" Eckhart whirled away, making it back to the *Marathon* at a fast clip. "Get to the command center and send all my crew back here on the double. We have to go after her. It's an emergency."

Eckhart forgot for a moment that this ancient alien was a Bion as fast and as powerful as Alice. Squids moved so fast that Eckhart didn't see him coming until Squids skidded in front of him.

Squids planted his hand on Eckhart's chest to stop him. "Hold it right there, Eckhart. You aren't leaving—not now."

"I have to." Eckhart sidestepped to get around him. "This is important."

"Not as important as this. We had to deal with the Regiment before, but now you're going to listen to me, Eckhart. You have to come upstairs with me to Aistenz's apartment. Whatever you have going on can wait."

"What, now? You want me to stand around and talk to Aistenz *now*?"

"Yes, now. I'm sorry, but I can't let you go anywhere until you do. It's important. It's more than important. It's critical."

Eckhart started to protest, and then he remembered. His whole future and fortune depended on Aistenz Trotaer. If Eckhart wanted to find and rescue DeWalt, he needed Aistenz.

Aistenz was the most powerful ally Eckhart could ask for, and if the Regiment had DeWalt, Eckhart would never find any force in the galaxy stronger than Aistenz's. Eckhart would need every resource in Aistenz's formidable arsenal to go against the Regiment.

He let out a shaky breath, turned back to the elevator, and stepped inside with Squids.

"Thank you, Eckhart," Squids murmured on their way upstairs. "I wasn't sure who else to turn to."

"Whatever," Eckhart muttered. "You didn't give me much of a choice, did you? What's so important, anyway? Does Aistenz want Bing to give him another Eplite treatment or something?"

"I wouldn't like to elaborate until you get up there. It's…a sensitive subject."

Eckhart snorted. "I'll bet it is—but not as sensitive as the whole fringe population getting slaughtered, right?"

Squids glanced over at him. "What do you mean?"

"Never mind. I'll take it up with Aistenz. No reason not to take it to the very top, right?"

Squids didn't say anything else. The elevator opened on the *Atera*'s topmost deck. Eckhart seethed in turmoil while he and Squids crossed to the entrance to Aistenz's apartment.

Eckhart had to get this meeting out of the way quickly. Every

minute of delay was another minute closer the Regiment came to using DeWalt against the fringe aliens. Every second counted.

Squids opened the door, but the moment Eckhart stepped inside, he realized something was wrong—very wrong.

The familiar buzz of Aistenz's wings no longer filled the apartment. The creature didn't buzz from the end of his chain around the central spiral pillar.

Aistenz lay motionless on his bed to the left, and the instant Eckhart laid eyes on his old friend, he knew. Aistenz didn't move. He didn't breathe. His fragile wings lay crumpled on the mattress next to him. The compound eyes had glazed over.

Aistenz Trotaer, the greatest criminal mastermind ever to terrorize the galaxy, was dead.

"I just found him like this a few hours ago," Squids croaked. "You and the other squadrons were still on Rulara. I didn't know what to do, and when the Regiment followed you here, I knew I had to act fast. That's why I asked you to pilot the *Atera*."

"You…*what*?" Eckhart stammered. "You decided to ask *me*?"

"We need someone strong, Eckhart. Someone has to fill the power vacuum, and whoever it is has to be strong. We need someone who can step into Aistenz's shoes—or whatever they are—and that person has to do it immediately. We need someone who can just take over with no interruption in power. A power struggle at this stage would destroy us."

"Hold the phone, pal!" Eckhart fired back. "You can*not* be serious. You can't seriously be suggesting that *I* take over for Aistenz. That's preposterous."

"Why? The command center crew has already seen you pilot the ship, and they all trust Rixby. She's been stellar in command during the battle against both the Lion Tribe and the Regiment. You two can take over and—"

"Stop!" Eckhart interrupted. "I am *not* taking over for Aistenz! Are you insane? He's…" Eckhart's hands flew to his head, trying to comprehend all this. "I mean, I'm nothing. I'm nobody. I'm—"

"He trusted you. He believed in you."

"Did he ever actually say that he wanted me to take over for him? Did he tell you that? Because he sure as hell never said anything to me."

"Of course not, but he never talked about having a successor at all. He conducted himself as though he would live forever—right up

until Pheste, that is. Once he got injured, he became even more desperate to find you. That's why he tracked you to Sorix. He wanted to find you at all costs. I only assumed…"

"No!" Eckhart cut in. "Just no. I can't."

"Please, Eckhart!" Squids lowered his voice to a strained whisper. "If anyone finds out about this before we appoint a successor, it could cause pandemonium. Everyone would leave. All of Aistenz's power would be broken in a split second. Please…I'm begging you."

Eckhart started to protest again. Take over for Aistenz? Take Aistenz's power and wield his whole empire? No way. No way in hell could Eckhart do that.

Then his mind switched gears. DeWalt was back in Regiment custody. The Regiment had a weapon designed specifically to wipe out the whole fringe population.

Considering the kind of weapons they had been breeding in their underground labs, God only knew what powers DeWalt might have. DeWalt could be as powerful as Akkek. He would be absolutely unstoppable if he was.

What was Eckhart just thinking a few seconds ago? He needed Aistenz's whole formidable empire to take on the Regiment. That was nothing compared to what he would need if he went against DeWalt.

Was this the key? Eckhart had come up here preparing himself to convince Aistenz to carry out this campaign. Now Eckhart didn't have to convince anyone. Here was Squids begging Eckhart to take control of Aistenz's empire for himself. "All right. I'll do it."

Squids seized Eckhart's hand and whimpered over it. "Thank you, Eckhart! You don't know what this means! Oh, thank you! I'm so grateful."

Eckhart looked down at Aistenz. "What do you want to do with him? Should we conduct some kind of burial ritual? I don't know anything about his species."

"We can't do that!" Squids whispered. "That would cause even more uncertainty in Aistenz's network. We'll keep it quiet, and I'll dispose of the body without telling anyone. We'll send out word to our network that you're acting as Aistenz's appointed successor. We won't tell them that he's dead until you've consolidated power and everyone is working under your authority."

Eckhart started to argue again, but he stopped himself. Of

course. The fringe underworld worked this way. Leaders rose, got assassinated, and their underlings replaced them. What better way to ensure the continuity of power?

"All right. We'll do it." Squids started to fawn on Eckhart's hand again, but Eckhart took it back from him. "We have a much more immediate situation right now."

"We do? What can be more immediate than this?"

"Consider this my first order as your new…whatever I am."

"Boss?" Squids suggested.

"Fine. Consider this your first commission. I want every ship in the whole network armed and equipped to go against the Regiment when I get back." Eckhart turned to the door. "Do whatever you have to do to strengthen the fleet—buy more ships, enhance their weapons—the works. Understand?"

Squids stood rooted to the spot. "You want to go against the Regiment?"

"That's right, but I have something else I have to do first."

Squids followed him out of the apartment. "What is it?"

"I'm going to find Akkek Stratha."

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4

Eckhart stepped into the elevator. The door closed on his last view of Squids standing in Aistenz's apartment. If Eckhart never saw that apartment again, it would be too soon.

He checked himself on the ride back down to the command center. That conversation had changed him even more than finding out about DeWalt, more than his ordeal with Vora, more than leaving Parilia, more than anything he could ever remember.

He was a mob boss now—probably the most powerful mob boss on the fringes. The whole world would cringe at the sound of his name now. His word would be law to everyone who crossed his path.

He felt himself change on the short trip down to the command center. The sensation of being in charge of the whole world crept over him. It transformed him from a nobody into…into this.

He felt like Dallas—five feet thick and bulletproof. No one could touch him. No one could argue with him and no one could stop him. The world was his to steamroll wherever he wanted to go.

He only wanted to go one place right now, and for the first time in his life, he had the steamroller to get there. He would make the Regiment pay for this. He wouldn't stop until he finished the job, and this was the first time in his life when he was absolutely, completely, thoroughly certain that he would do it.

He didn't know just how powerful Aistenz's empire was, but he was about to find out. He no longer had to ask anyone's permission. He would bring every gun on the fringes against the Regiment.

That was the whole reason the Regiment created these living weapons. The Regiment and the Earth solar system lived in terror that the fringe aliens would rise up. Then the Regiment wouldn't be able to stop the alien scum hordes from overrunning Earth itself.

The Regiment wouldn't be able to stand against the fringe aliens if the fringe aliens joined forces to assert their rights. The Regiment sowed discontent, criminality, and internal conflict between alien races so they never did join forces.

Eckhart saw the whole path laid bare before him. He would unite the fringe aliens. He would show them what they could

accomplish if they set their power against the Regiment and the centralized hegemony of Earth. Nothing and no one would be able to stop this once it got started.

He stepped out onto the command center floor. Rixby still stood on her console, walking back and forth on her controls. She tapped and called orders to her staff. Eckhart hated to interrupt her. She was home.

He didn't want to go ahead with this plan without her by his side. Losing Alice was a blow, but losing Rixby… He didn't want to imagine it, but he had to bite the bullet.

He stepped onto the podium, but she still didn't notice him for a minute. When she did, her antennae swiveled up to gaze at him. "Is anything wrong, Eckhart?"

"No, everything's fine. If you aren't too busy, Rixby, I need to talk to you in private."

She hopped down and followed him to a conference room off the *Atera*'s bridge. Eckhart opened the door to let Rixby inside, and shut the door behind him. She climbed onto the table so her antennae came up to the level of his face. "What's going on? How's Clifton?"

Eckhart took a deep breath. "I have to tell you something, Rixby. I don't like it, but it has to be done. DeWalt is alive, and he's somewhere in Regiment custody."

She gasped. "No!"

Eckhart nodded. "I need you to find him. I need you to go through every Regiment record from the time we left Clifton and DeWalt in the hospital on Pheste. I need you to find DeWalt, and when I get back, we're going after him."

"We? Who's we?"

"All of us. We're going to use Aistenz's fleet to hunt down DeWalt, and we're going to stop the Regiment from using him against the fringe aliens. I'm not sure if DeWalt will be helping the Regiment, but if he is, we'll have to fight him, too. We'll have to stop him in whatever way we can. We just need you to find him first."

"Okay. I can do that." She inclined her head the other way. "Something else is bothering you. What is it?"

He spread his hands in front of her. "Alice is leaving. She doesn't want to serve under Aistenz Trotaer, and I promised her on Zuic 7HP9 that I wouldn't stop her if she wanted to leave."

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because I won’t be leaving. I’m taking the *Marathon* to Imeliv H8 to find Akkek. I’m hoping I can convince her to come back and help us against the Regiment. When I get back, with her or without her, I’ll be staying here. Any of you that wants to leave can do it then. I won’t blame you if you want to stay independent and not get involved.”

She waved her antennae at him. “Is that it? Is that all you wanted to say to me?”

“That, and to ask you to find DeWalt.”

She hopped off the table. “Okay. I’ll go get back to work, then.”

She walked out and left him standing there. What was that supposed to mean? Was she leaving or not?

He couldn’t worry about that. He had to bring Akkek back. He would just have to hope for the best where Rixby was concerned, but if she found DeWalt, he wouldn’t begrudge her for leaving. That was the biggest favor she could do for him.

He went to the elevator to find Squids coming out of it. Squids stepped back inside. “The fleet is assembling, and I have the mercenaries gathering at Tictus.”

“How many mercenaries do we have?”

“Forty thousand.”

Eckhart whipped around to stare. Why did this surprise him?

“What do you want to do about armaments?” Squids asked. “All of the mercenaries will need weapons and ammunition, not to mention other supplies and transportation.”

“Just gather them and get them whatever they need to be ready to deploy. We’ll deal with the niceties when I get back.”

“Are you really going to Imeliv H8 to bring Akkek back?”

“Of course. Do you think I’d go against the Regiment without Akkek?”

Squids shrugged. “I guess not. That’s a prudent course.”

“Wish me luck.”

“Good luck.”

Eckhart stepped out on the landing platform, and Squids stayed in the elevator. Eckhart saw himself turning into a completely different person, a person who really could take Aistenz Trotaer’s place.

Eckhart no longer cared if Squids thought tracking down Akkek was a good idea. He was doing it. He only wished he’d known the

full situation before she left.

Now he had to find the most notorious master of disguise somewhere on a planet crawling with aliens of every kind. She would be impossible to locate unless she wanted to be found.

He strode over to the *Marathon* to find Dallas, Bing, and Alice standing in the cargo hold.

"What did you want to talk to us about?" Dallas asked.

"Load up. We're leaving."

Alice jolted. "*We* are?"

"Yes, and Rixby is staying behind, so I'll need you up front, Alice."

"What do you mean, Rixby is staying behind?" Dallas asked.

"It's pretty straightforward, isn't it? She's staying here while we go out in the *Marathon*."

"Are you abandoning her or something?" Dallas asked.

"Is she abandoning *us*?" Bing asked.

"Is she going into Aistenz's service, too?" Alice snarled.

"No, she isn't. She's doing a job for me, and she can do it better here than on the *Marathon*."

"What job is that?"

"She's tracking down DeWalt. Clifton says the Regiment has DeWalt back, so we're going to find him and steal him from the Regiment."

Alice groaned and looked up at the ceiling. "Not again!"

"So where is he?" Dallas asked. "How far do we have to go to find him?"

"We don't know where he is yet. That's why Rixby has to track him down. We're going to Imeliv H8 to get Akkek. We'll need her, since we're going to war against the Regiment."

"Did you convince Aistenz to go to war against the Regiment?"

"Something like that." Eckhart walked past them and headed up the stairs. "I'm leaving. If you want to stay or go somewhere else, you should get off the ship now."

He stepped onto the gangway, but he didn't go to the bridge. He went to his quarters and found Clifton sound asleep on his own bunk. Eckhart smiled at him and left him there.

The bridge felt strange without Rixby on it, but it would feel a lot stranger without both Rixby and Alice. Then again, Eckhart wouldn't be flying around in the *Marathon* much, if he ever did it again.

What would his life be like as boss of a giant criminal organization stretching the length and breadth of the fringes? He had a lot of catching up to do before he understood all the convoluted machinations of Aistenz's many operations. Eckhart doubted that even Squids understood them all.

That was a matter for another day. He checked the regulators. Bing and Dallas strapped into the galley. Alice came to the bridge and took her station. "Do we need a façade for Imeliv H8?"

"Not that I know of," Eckhart replied. "We have money to spend. We're taking that spree I told you about."

She snarled under her breath, and he laughed to himself. This was going to be fun.

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5

“Just how exactly do you plan to find Akkek Stratha in *that*?” Alice sneered.

She, Eckhart, Bing, and Dallas stood on the *Marathon*’s bridge looking over the teeming hordes of aliens crowding Imeliv H8.

A vast interconnected web of scaffolds, levels, platforms, and tiers covered the pleasure planet as far as the eye could see. The structure towered hundreds of stories above the planet’s surface with no end in sight. In fact, it surrounded the planet in a solid megalopolis, with no walls separating one location from another.

Brothels, pleasure houses, drug dens, and illicit markets carried out their business on every level, making no attempt at all to hide their doings from anyone else. No one ever interfered with anything or anyone on Imeliv H8. The economy boomed, with plenty of kickbacks and greased palms for everyone.

“Did you scan for Akeix life signs?” Bing asked

Alice snarled at him through her mask. “Do you think I’m stupid? If I found Akeix life signs in this shithole, we’d be tracking her down right now instead of standing around listening to your stupid suggestions.”

“Excuse me for trying to be helpful,” Bing muttered.

“You’d be more helpful if you kept your mouth shut. Of course I scanned for Akeix life signs. I’m not incompetent at my job, unlike some people I could mention.”

“How do we even know Akkek is here?” Dallas asked. “She could have gone somewhere else.”

“She’s here,” Eckhart murmured. “Coming here was more important to her than whatever she owed Aistenz.”

“It doesn’t matter if we found Akeix life signs or not,” Alice added. “Akkek Stratha can disguise herself as any species. She can *become* any species. We would never find her that way.”

“We don’t have to find her life signs or anything like that,” Eckhart replied.

“How do you say we should find her, then?” Bing asked. “We could spend the rest of our lives going through this place one alien at a time—not that I’m complaining or anything.”

He shot a wild grin at Eckhart, and Alice groaned. “Let’s just leave him here and be done with it.”

“Set a course for Govax Station,” Eckhart told Alice.

All three of his friends whipped around to stare at him. “That’s a Regiment station,” Dallas whispered.

“I know it is. Akkek came here to fight the Regiment. If she’s anywhere, she’ll be there.”

Alice sat down in her seat and steered the *Marathon* over the vast superstructure. It covered the entire planet—all except one spot.

Eckhart scanned the station as they approached. Govax Station had the same layout as every other Regiment station.

“About half the staff are reading as Earthling,” Alice remarked. “Govax has a much higher percentage of alien staff than any other Regiment station I’ve ever seen.”

“That explains why Akkek picked this station,” Eckhart replied. “So many alien staff are going to make it a hell of a lot easier for her to sneak onto the station as someone else.”

“That only makes it harder for us to find her.” Dallas peered over Eckhart’s shoulder at the charts and schematics on the regulators. “There must be a thousand aliens on the station alone.”

“We don’t have to find her. Look.”

Eckhart pointed to a pillar of fire and smoke rising from the far side of the station.

“Holy crap!” Bing murmured. “What does she think she’s going to do—hop from one station to the next, razing the whole United Collateral Regiment to the ground?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised.” Eckhart grabbed the regulators “Let’s get in there and—”

He drove the *Marathon* forward in a slow, cautious crawl across Imeliv H8, but long before he got anywhere near the station, a party of Banshees streaked up behind the *Marathon*.

The Regiment ships opened fire, but their shots zinged past the *Marathon*, aiming for something in the distance.

Eckhart pulled back on the throttle, but it was too late. A blazing explosion of light and energy detonated from somewhere inside Govax Station. It vaulted into the night sky above Imeliv H8 and burned brightly there.

Lasers erupted from the black outline of a woman suspended amidst a blinding epicenter of pure power. Lasers spat in all

directions, but none of them hit the *Marathon*. They hurtled past the ship's hull and ripped ten Banshees apart.

Eckhart slammed the regulators hard to port. "Keep a lock on Akkek! Track her wherever she goes. Don't let her disappear on us again."

Bing and Dallas both grabbed the railing behind Eckhart's station. "What are you doing?" Bing shrieked. "We can't fight her."

"I'm not trying to fight her! I'm getting the hell out of here. She'll destroy anyone who tries to stop her."

Another brutal fountain of lasers screeched outward from the margins of Akkek's halo. They blasted the rest of the Banshees to smithereens, while the rest of Akkek's shots pounded into the station itself.

Datrium reserves went up in ground-shaking explosions. Parked battleships *ka-boom*ed in giant mushroom clouds of fire and debris, and then Akkek started on the personnel barracks and command headquarters.

Eckhart wheeled away and hit the throttle, but the moment he got out of danger, another armada of ships rocketed out of the city.

Eckhart didn't have time to see exactly where they came from, probably because they came from everywhere at once. What looked at first like civilian transport craft took off from platforms and decks all over Imeliv. They gunned their engines on a dead course for Govax.

Some activated their everyday defensive weapons systems. Others opened hidden panels and gunports on their sides. They extended concealed cannons and lasers no one would have known were there.

All those ships converged on the station and added their fire to Akkek's devastating assault. The alien horde raced up to the *Marathon*, which was the only ship left in the sky, and the fringe armada opened fire.

A barrage of lasers skittered across the starboard flank before Eckhart could pull away. "What the hell!" Bing shrieked. "We didn't do anything!"

"They don't know that, damn it!" Eckhart fired back as fast as he could, but he already saw that it wouldn't do any good. The fringe aliens had too many ships in the air.

More explosions rocked the station from behind. Eckhart didn't turn around to see the whole place going up in smoke, but a second

later, one of the blasts set off a domino effect into the city.

A rolling cascade of explosions peeled out of the station, caught hold of a pipeline running up the scaffolding, and kept on going. Platforms and gathering places shuddered and then evaporated as gas, fuel, and energy combined to blow the place apart.

"To hell with it!" Eckhart gritted his teeth and dropped the throttle forward to its limit. The *Marathon* plunged away, putting as much distance as possible between Govax and the ship.

Once he got clear, the fringe aliens left him alone and turned their ire on Govax. The regulators showed the Station being steadily obliterated from the charts as more ships assembled from all over the planet to help out.

"Wow!" Dallas whispered. "The Regiment really needs to work on its public relations profile."

"What did she do?" Bing husked. "How did Akkek get the fringe aliens to attack like that?"

"She must have spread the word that she planned to attack." Eckhart turned to Alice. "Do you have any trace on her?"

At that moment, Akkek Stratha materialized in front of Eckhart's chair on the *Marathon*'s bridge. "What do you want, Eckhart?"

He slammed back in his seat. "Holy shit! Don't do that!"

She cocked her head to study him. "What are you doing here? I did my part to defeat the Lion Tribe. I don't owe Aistenz anything."

"I'm not here for Aistenz. We need your help to defeat the Regiment."

"That's what I'm doing."

"Not like this. DeWalt is alive, and the Regiment has him in their custody. They'll use whatever's wrong with him as a weapon against the fringes, the same way they planned to use Zidriuq, Gaemo, and Menilia."

Her expression changed exactly the way he knew it would when he mentioned her fallen friends.

He followed up his advantage. "You're the only person strong enough to take on the Regiment. You said you wanted to take them down and stop them from wiping out the fringes. Now's your chance. We won't be able to get DeWalt away from them without you. Please. I'm asking you to come back with us—not for Aistenz, and not for me. I'm asking you to do it for all of us—for the whole fringe population. None of us will survive without you."

She didn't respond for a long time. She searched his eyes in a

way that demanded he lay himself bare before her. Was she thinking that he wasn't a member of the fringe population? He was an Earthling. She had every right to think of him as her enemy.

"If I do this," she finally said, "Aistenz has to know I'm not doing it for him. I'll coordinate with his fleet and his forces, but I make my own decisions. Is that understood?"

"Yes!" Eckhart croaked. "Thank you."

She hesitated again. "I'm not sure I can defeat DeWalt. I just want to make that perfectly clear right now. If I have to fight him, he might be able to destroy me. I really don't know."

"Do you know what they did to him?" Dallas asked. "Do you know anything about this virus they infected him with?"

"We don't even know it *was* a virus," Alice cut in. "Ilke told us it was a virus, and we all saw how reliable her information was."

"I don't know what they did to him," Akkek replied. "Whatever they used on him was a generation after me. Gaemo and Zidriuq went into the Silvercloud Vault first, then Menilia. I came last, and that was years before DeWalt left Earth."

"That explains why he didn't start showing symptoms until after we took him from OSMZ," Eckhart mused. "Rixby said he and Clifton were normal when they came on board. DeWalt only started running a fever afterward, which would match up with what Ilke said about the Trinity Code infecting him right before he left Earth."

"Why don't you ask Clifton?" Akkek asked.

"How can we?" Bing asked. "Clifton is on the *Atera*."

"Actually, he isn't," Eckhart replied. "Clifton is here. He's in my quarters."

"He knows more about DeWalt than I do," Akkek went on. "Clifton was with DeWalt right up until the Regiment retook him into their custody."

Eckhart grimaced. "I don't think Clifton is in a condition to tell us much of anything about DeWalt."

"But DeWalt was obviously alive when we left Pheste," Bing pointed out. "He had to be, or we wouldn't be having this discussion. Both Clifton and DeWalt survived the bombing."

"That's pretty clear," Dallas agreed. "The Lion Tribe wouldn't have imprisoned Clifton behind a wall at Black Mountain if he didn't pose some threat to someone."

"And the Regiment wouldn't have come after us on Rulara,

either, unless they were worried someone would find him," Eckhart added. "All those prisoners must be sensitive to someone, or the Lion Tribe wouldn't go to such lengths to keep them hidden."

"Do you even know where DeWalt is?" Akkek asked.

"Well, no," Eckhart admitted, "but Rixby is working on it."

Akkek made a face, but just then, another explosion went off somewhere. Alice put up the tactical grid without asking. "More Regiment ships coming in from Oiwei Station. They're engaging the fringe armada."

Eckhart didn't get a chance to move. Akkek evaporated, and a second later, the regulators activated without Eckhart doing anything. The *Marathon* veered sharply and started whizzing back toward Govax.

"She's doing it again," Alice snarled. "She's taken control of the damn ship."

Eckhart tried to wrestle the helm back under his own control, and then gave it up. He couldn't fight Akkek when she wanted to do something.

She drove the ship faster and faster. An alarm started blaring on the regulators when the engines shrieked past the safe zone and into danger territory, but Akkek didn't slow down.

The tactical grid flickered picking up Regiment Colossuses diving into the atmosphere. The *Marathon*'s guns whirled so fast Eckhart's eyes couldn't keep up with them. The grid picked out targets, fired, and moved on in a blinding flash of light and explosions.

The *Marathon* spiraled around the Colossuses and swooped back to meet the fringe armada coming from Govax. Eckhart shuddered at the sight of so many alien ships assembling in a vast horde to confront the Regiment.

This was a preview of things to come. If he used Aistenz's network to fight the Regiment, scenes like this would become normal on the fringes. The Regiment would bring out every resource to defeat the aliens.

The fringe population wouldn't lie down and take it, either. They'd been living under Earth's heel for long enough, and once they rose, they wouldn't go back down—ever.

The *Marathon* advanced behind the fringe armada and shot through, picking up speed to crash into the Colossuses. The instant the *Marathon* crossed the fringe line, every other ship on the alien

side rocketed forward in a death charge.

"Holy blinkin' shit!" Alice hissed. "She's flying them all! She's controlling every ship on the line!"

"How is that even possible?" Dallas whispered.

"She's getting stronger," Eckhart replied. "She couldn't do any of this when we first left the Silvercloud Vault. She's been getting stronger ever since."

Sure enough, distress calls came from several ships on the alien side, but they didn't break off. They couldn't.

The *Marathon* crew watched in frozen shock as Akkek caught all those hundreds of ships in her invisible control. She dragged them into the *Marathon*'s wake, and they all drove into the Regiment forces at once.

Every gun exploded. The Colossuses assaulted the aliens with countless guns, but all the Regiment shots went straight through their alien adversaries.

Four huge Colossuses targeted the *Marathon*. Eckhart couldn't help but cringe, watching on the tactical grid as their shots streaked toward the ship; but instead of striking the Celdian shielding, those blasts went through the *Marathon*, too.

The battle that followed quickly devolved into a shooting gallery, with the fringe aliens surrounding the Regiment. As soon as the aliens gained the upper hand, their flight patterns changed. They showed the unmistakable sign of pilot error and individual direction. Akkek wasn't steering them anymore.

The aliens ganged up on the Colossuses and picked off parts of the giant ships with vindictive precision. Engines exploded first, and then the aliens had their fun punching holes in the ships' hulls until they burst, one after another.

Akkek protected the aliens from any Regiment response, but the battle had already tipped too far in the other direction. In a few minutes, nothing remained of the Regiment reinforcements.

"It won't last," Dallas remarked. "They'll send out more. The Regiment won't let a challenge like this go unanswered."

Eckhart started to say something when Akkek reappeared in the middle of the bridge. "That's why we have to be ready for them. Go back to Aistenz, Eckhart. I'll meet you there."

"You won't run off again, will you?" Eckhart asked. "You won't forget?"

"How could I forget? I want to defeat the Regiment as much as

you do."

Eckhart nodded toward the fringe aliens. Their ships had already started to drift back to their platforms and parking spaces all over Imeliv H8. "Are you going to just abandon them to their fate? The Regiment will come back here to retaliate. The fringe aliens won't be able to protect themselves without you."

"The Regiment won't come here, because Aistenz's fleet will go to the Regiment first. We'll go to Oiwei Station and engage the Regiment there. They'll have to forget about this incident while they deal with us."

Eckhart could see plenty of holes in that plan, but he was too glad to get her help to argue. "You promise you'll meet me back on the *Atera*?"

She groaned and rolled her eyes. "Yes, Eckhart. I have better things to do than ride at a snail's pace on the *Marathon*." And she vanished again.

"We are *not* allying with that bitch!" Alice snarled.

"*You* aren't. You're leaving," Eckhart pointed out.

Alice fell silent, sat down at her station, and didn't turn around again all the way back to the *Atera*.

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6

Eckhart finished making a few adjustments to the *Marathon*'s engines, but Aistenz's mechanics had done such a good job that there was nothing left to do.

He put his tools away and wandered back upstairs. He had plenty to think about. He still struggled to believe he would find himself in charge of Aistenz's whole empire as soon as he got back to the *Atera*.

He didn't like keeping this from his crew. He wanted to tell them as soon as possible. He just had to find the right time and place to do it. Hell, there might never be a right time and place, considering the mission ahead of him.

He went up to his quarters, but when he stepped inside, he found the place deserted. He strode down the gangway and checked all the other crew cabins, but Clifton wasn't there, either.

Eckhart went into the infirmary and found Bing going through the new supplies Aistenz's crew had stocked in the cupboards. "Have you seen Clifton?"

Bing shook his head. "I haven't seen him since we brought him back from Black Mountain. Is he missing?"

"I'm not sure."

Eckhart stopped on the gangway and listened. He heard someone moving around in the galley, and when he went in there, he found Clifton sitting on the table eating a ration pack. Dallas stood across the room with his arm hooked up to his nutrient aperture, but the two men weren't talking.

Clifton looked up and immediately looked away. "I was hungry."

"Help yourself, man. You look a lot better now that you've gotten some sleep."

Clifton put a guinea bar in his mouth. Then he held up a second one. "I haven't had one of these since I was in the Regiment."

Eckhart tried to lighten the mood by laughing. "Beggars can't be choosers around here. Sorry."

"It's good. I always liked these things."

Eckhart glanced over at Dallas, who listened to their conversation in silence. Dallas didn't mention that he'd once been

in the Regiment, too.

Dallas and Clifton had bonded over that little item they both had in common, but maybe Clifton was back to considering everyone on the *Marathon* crew besides Eckhart an alien freak.

"Feel free to take a shower in my quarters if you want to," Eckhart offered. "You can put on some clean clothes, too. I don't have any suits as nice as yours, but—"

"Who are you trying to fool, Eckhart?" Dallas interrupted. "You don't own even one suit."

Eckhart had to laugh, and to his surprise, Clifton laughed, too. "Let me guess. A suit would burst into flame if you put it on."

Eckhart laughed much louder this time. "You're probably right."

"Are you kidding?" Dallas interjected again. "Suits burst into tears if he so much as walks into the same room with one of them."

All three men laughed, and Clifton started to look something like his former self. He ate another guinea bar, and his smile faded. "I've been thinking, Eckhart."

"Don't make a habit of that. You might hurt yourself."

Clifton didn't take the joke. "I want to help you fight the Regiment. I…I eavesdropped on your conversation with Akkek. You were all too busy to notice me."

"Well, it isn't a big secret what we plan to do."

"I want to go with you," Clifton went on. "I know I'm not as strong as I was, but I can shoot as well as ever, and I'm not too shabby as a pilot, either. I…uh…" He looked down at his food. "I don't want to wear a suit anymore."

"Thank God for that!" Dallas murmured from behind him.

Eckhart squeezed Clifton's shoulder. "We would all be honored if you helped us. We all need Earthlings on our side…and anything you can tell us about DeWalt will be a big help."

"I can't tell you anything. I never saw him."

"What do you mean?" Eckhart asked. "You were with him at the hospital on Pheste."

Clifton nodded. "We were together at the hospital, but after the explosion, a bunch of Megaliths landed outside and the Regiment guys came in. Uniformed Regiment officers took DeWalt straight out of his bed, and handed me over to…" Clifton's eyes darted toward Dallas. Then Clifton gulped and forged ahead. "They handed me over to a bunch of aliens. I'm ashamed to say I don't know what species they were."

“That’s okay, man. You’re learning. Just tell me this. Were they a bunch of different species or all one species?”

“A bunch of different species. There must have been fifty species all running the one ship.”

“The Lion Tribe,” Dallas cut in. “They were the ones who imprisoned you.”

“Yeah, they were,” Clifton confirmed. “They…brutalized all the prisoners, even the ones from the same species as them. They brutalized everyone indiscriminately.”

“Did you pick up anything on the Megalith? Did the Lion Tribe give anything away about why they took those particular people as prisoners?”

“No. I’m sorry. I didn’t pick anything up. The Lion Tribe acted like they didn’t even know why I was a prisoner. The only ones I talked to had no idea who I was or where I came from. They also couldn’t tell me what happened to DeWalt, or why I went with them and DeWalt went with the Regiment.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Eckhart clapped Clifton on the shoulder again. “Thank you for your help. We all really appreciate you being with us.”

“Thanks. I’m very glad to be here with you—with all of you.”

Eckhart opened his mouth one more time, and hesitated. “We’ll be back on the *Atera* pretty soon, and the place will be crawling with aliens. I don’t like to rush you or anything, but you might want to get over it sooner rather than later. If you want to help us, you’ll be fighting alongside aliens—a lot of them. Dallas and I are the only Earthlings you’re likely to see on this side of what could turn out to be a very long and ruthless war.”

Clifton lowered his eyes. “I realize that.”

“In that case, I need you to go over to the *Atera*. Squids will assign you quarters over there. You can’t stay here.”

“Why not?” Clifton asked.

“I’ll explain later. You can go with Dallas. He’ll show you where to go.”

Eckhart turned to leave, but not without shooting a significant glance at Dallas. Dallas was the perfect person for Clifton to practice his alien tolerance on.

Eckhart headed out of the galley and heard Dallas unlocking from the aperture as Eckhart left. “You better be careful, man,” Dallas was saying. “If you hang around aliens too much, you might

become one of them, like Eckhart has. You won't want to go home."

Eckhart went back up to the bridge, but when he spotted Alice still sitting with her back to him, Eckhart left without speaking to her. He had enough on his mind without dealing with her right now.

He kept fiddling with various systems, not because they needed maintenance or adjustment, but simply to occupy himself with something familiar. He didn't know how long it would be before he got to appreciate this ship again.

He almost regretted his decision to take over Aistenz's empire. He'd enjoyed being independent and unknown all these years. He didn't resent Alice for her decision. He envied her.

When the *Marathon* finally docked on the *Atera*'s landing platform, Eckhart went down to the cargo hold with Dallas and Bing. "You two go up to the command center and wait for me there. I want to talk to you both."

"What do you want to talk to us about there that you can't talk to us about here?" Dallas asked.

"I'll explain it all when we get there. Go on."

The two friends exchanged glances, and then shrugged before they headed off. Eckhart almost left, too, when Rixby showed up. "I found DeWalt, Eckhart. He's at Oiwei Station."

Eckhart raised his eyebrows. "Is that so?"

"Why does it matter which station he's at? He's just as dangerous there as anywhere else."

"He's more dangerous because he's deeper inside fringe territory. The Regiment must be about to use him."

"Is that all you want me to do?" Rixby asked.

"Not all. I want you to make a decision now about whether you're staying or leaving. Do you want to stay here and help us get DeWalt back, or do you want to leave and stay independent?"

"How can you even ask that, Eckhart? You know I'm staying."

"All right. I just wanted to make sure you're sure."

"I'm sure, Eckhart," she insisted. "I'm insulted that you would even ask."

He had to smile at her. "I'm sorry. Now could you please go back up to the command center and meet up with Dallas and Bing? I need to talk to the three of you."

"Okay." She waddled off and left him alone in the *Marathon*'s cargo hold.

Only now, when he was totally alone, did he allow his emotions to come to the surface. He'd known this would be hard, but he didn't think it would be as hard as this.

He went back up to the bridge, and this time, Alice rose from her seat, turned around, and confronted him. "It's time, Eckhart."

"Yeah." Tears stung his eyes when he gazed into her black sockets. "Thank you for everything you've done for me. I'll never forget you, and…I'll owe you for life. If there's anything I can do for you, just tell me."

"You've done enough, Eckhart. Just don't try to stop me from leaving."

"I won't stop you. In fact…" He choked on the words. "I want you to take the *Marathon*."

She stared at him. "You're insane."

"Not really. I won't need it anymore. I want you to take it. Consider it compensation for all the jobs when I couldn't pay you what you're worth."

"I can't take the *Marathon*, Eckhart. This ship…it's like your right arm."

He had to smile, and he didn't even try to control his face. The softness in her tone hurt too much. "I know. That's why I want you to have it. I know you'll take care of it and make good use of it. I can't think of anyone I'd rather have it. Just do me one favor as payment, and take Innyria back to Parilia. Then we'll call it even."

She kept still for a long time, and then sighed through her mask. He'd never seen her let her guard down like this. "I'll take the ship, but we'll call it a loan. If you ever want it back, just ask."

"Okay." He smiled again, and one tear streaked down his cheek. He would never ask for the *Marathon* back. He never wanted it back. He wanted her to have it. Maybe then she would understand how he felt about her. He couldn't think of any other way to show her.

She still didn't move. She didn't go over to the command seat. She just stared at him.

He couldn't stand the silence any longer. He walked up to her and put his arms around her for the first and only time. He hugged her bony, unforgiving frame.

She stiffened at first and then, without warning, she pressed her hand to his back, just once.

That was enough. He broke away and whispered, "Bye," before

he walked out. He didn't give himself a chance to look at the ship on his way back downstairs. He wiped tears off his face and managed to pull himself together by the time he stepped out onto the landing platform.

Innyria came up to him when Eckhart approached the elevator. "You okay, man?" Innyria asked.

Eckhart nodded with difficulty. "I just said goodbye to Alice. She's agreed to take you back to Parilia."

"Okay. I guess so."

Eckhart bumped his friend's shoulder. "You don't want to stick around here. Go back to Parilia where you belong."

"Thanks, Eckhart—again. I owe you even bigger for this than I did before."

Eckhart laughed it off. "Forget it."

"You always say that, but I can't forget it. You know where to find me if you need me."

"Yeah. I do." Eckhart hugged Innyria, too, but it didn't carry the same weight as parting from Alice.

Both men smiled when they separated, and Eckhart watched Innyria climb on board the *Marathon*. The engines fired up and the ship lifted off. It turned out of the *Atera*'s hold and drifted off before the engines flared. The ship raced away and vanished into the stars.

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7

Eckhart gathered his resolve riding the elevator up to the command center. Alice was gone. Innyria was gone. The *Marathon* was gone.

No more lies. No more running around like a rat. Aistenz's empire needed a leader. The whole fringe alien population needed a hero right now, and Eckhart found himself becoming that person on these rides up and down the *Atera*'s internal elevator.

He knew exactly what he had to do. He had to become a crime lord as bad as Aistenz—or worse than Aistenz. The galaxy needed that right now, not another worthless unknown mercenary. It needed someone merciless, single-minded, and unwavering. It needed someone who would stop at nothing to do what had to be done.

He braced himself for the battle when the car stopped outside the command center. He would do it, and not because he had to. He would do it because he was born for this. It had been in his DNA since birth. He just didn't see it until now.

Aistenz had seen it. Aistenz had tried to bring Eckhart into his network when Eckhart was a seventeen-year-old street kid, but Eckhart wasn't ready then.

He stepped out to find Dallas, Bing, and Rixby all waiting for him. They weren't the only ones.

Akkek Stratha stood nose to nose with Squids, yelling at the poor man while the rest of the command center staff watched in horror. None of them would dare to raise their voices to Squids—not ever.

"I demand to see Aistenz now!" she roared. "What have you done with him? Why isn't he on this ship anymore? He's nowhere in the whole fleet. Where is he? Do you think I came all the way here to answer to *you*?"

Squids cowered before her wringing his hands. "I'm dreadfully sorry, Miss Stratha, but—"

"Don't give me your pathetic excuses!" Akkek cut in. "Just answer the damn question. How many times do I have to stand here and repeat it?"

"I can't…" Squids cast a desperate glance around at the listening

command center staff.

Eckhart stepped in. “I’ll handle this.” He took Akkek’s elbow. “Come here.”

“No!” She ripped her arm out of his grasp. “Leave me alone! I told you before. I didn’t come back here to answer to you or Aistenz or anyone else. If these idiots would only tell me where he is, I’d tell him myself. I’m not afraid of Aistenz, Squids. You might be, but some of us still have some backbone.”

“I know you aren’t afraid of Aistenz, Miss Stratha,” Squids began. “I just…”

“Forget it,” Eckhart interrupted. “Come on, Akkek. I’ll take you upstairs myself to see Aistenz. I’m going there myself.”

Squids spun around with a gasp. “What?”

“Yeah. Let’s go.” Eckhart tugged Akkek’s arm again. “Come on. We’ll all go together. You come, too, Squids.” Eckhart nodded to Dallas, Bing, and Rixby. “Come on, all of you. We’re going upstairs to see Aistenz.”

Squids stood rooted to the spot. He gawked at Eckhart with his mouth open as though Eckhart had completely taken leave of his senses.

Akkek took a moment to realize that Eckhart was serious. Then she marched over to the elevator and stormed inside. She stood there waiting for the others to load up.

Bing shrugged and went in there to join her. Dallas and Rixby followed, and Eckhart finally stepped inside. “Let’s go, Squids,” Eckhart repeated in a harder, more cutting tone.

Squids reacted instantly and stepped inside the car with them. They rode upstairs in a tense silence. Akkek kept shooting nasty glares at Squids, who did his absolute best to stare at the wall.

Bing and Rixby kept looking at everyone, and Eckhart could swear he spotted Bing grinning.

Halfway there, Bing turned to Eckhart. “Does Aistenz need any more Eplite treatments?”

Eckhart skipped a beat trying to come up with an appropriate answer. “I don’t think so, no.”

That was the extent of the conversation. When the doors opened, Eckhart led the way over to Aistenz’s apartment, while Squids dragged his feet and wrung his hands at the very back of the crowd.

Eckhart could only assume Squids had already disposed of

Aistenz's body. That must be why Akkek didn't detect Aistenz on the *Atera* or any of Aistenz's other ships.

Squids became even more agitated when Eckhart opened the apartment doors and escorted everyone inside. Dallas, Bing, and Rixby looked everywhere for Aistenz, but of course, Aistenz wasn't there.

"What the hell is this?" Akkek demanded. "Is this another trick? Where is Aistenz? Don't think you can get away with going back on our bargain, Eckhart."

"I have no plans to go back on our bargain. I brought you here to tell you that Aistenz Trotaer is dead."

The others stared at him. "When? How?" Akkek stammered. "What happened?"

"We don't know how it happened. Squids found him dead a few days ago. That's all we know. Aistenz is dead, and now we're going to use his fleet and his resources to find DeWalt and stop this Regiment plot. That's all we really need to know."

"That will never work," Akkek countered. "A criminal organization this big needs a leader. No one will do their jobs without one man at the top who can enforce the rules and make everyone else fall in line."

"As it happens, Aistenz left a successor. That successor is already in command of Aistenz's empire, and has been ever since Aistenz died."

"That changes everything," Rixby replied. "If Aistenz's people don't approve of this successor, they won't help defeat the Regiment. Everything depends on showing them that the successor is as powerful as Aistenz was."

"Who is this successor?" Akkek asked. "How do we know we can even trust him?"

Eckhart took a deep breath. "I'm the successor. I'm taking over Aistenz's organization."

Both Bing and Dallas burst out laughing. "Good one, Eckhart!" Bing spluttered. "Who's the successor, really?"

"I'm telling you the truth. I've been in command of this fleet since we came back from Black Mountain." Eckhart turned to Akkek. "I meant what I said. You can work independently. I don't expect you to come under my authority, and I wouldn't be able to make you do it even if I wanted to. I'm only asking you to help us to protect the fringes. That's all."

She narrowed her eyes at him so dangerously that he fully expected her to walk out on him and abandon the whole project. In the end, she sized him up with unflinching scrutiny. “I guess it could be a lot worse. At least I know who I’m dealing with.”

“Thank you,” he breathed. “I don’t know what you need from me, but if you want to stay on the *Atera*…”

“I have other things to do. I’ll be leaving, and I’ll come back when you go out to fight the Regiment at Oiwei.”

“How will I get in touch with you when I need you?”

“You won’t. I’ll keep an eye on things. I’ll know when you need me.”

“I won’t say I like it, but I guess I have no choice but to accept it.”

Akkek actually smiled, and she looked genuinely happy for the first time since he met her at the Silvercloud Vault. “No. You don’t.”

“So…are you just gonna leave?”

“Unless you have some other revelation to make.”

“No. That was it.”

She nodded. “I’ll see you in a few days, then.”

She vanished in front of his eyes, and Eckhart sighed. “I really wish she wouldn’t do that.”

“So…” Bing tiptoed into the room, glancing right toward the curved pillar and left toward Aistenz’s empty bed. “Is he really gone? Are you really the head honcho now?”

Eckhart chuckled. “Looks an awful lot like it.”

“This is great!” Dallas exclaimed. “No one will ever screw with us again, and we don’t have to go shooting the place to hell just to get paid.”

“What do you want us to do first?” Rixby asked. “How do you want to go about getting DeWalt back?”

“We’re going to Oiwei to get him. Did you find any information about where on the station they might be holding him?”

“His exact location is buried under heavy classified security measures, but an encrypted message definitely went out that Coleman DeWalt was logged into custody at Oiwei Station. The message left Oiwei for Earth a few days after we left Pheste, and he’s been there ever since.”

“So that’s a no,” Bing translated. “We don’t know where on the station they’re holding him.”

“Which means we can’t just fly in and start shooting,” Dallas

added.

"We can't take the chance that the rest of the fleet will fly in and start shooting, either," Eckhart finished.

Bing looked around him again. "Where's Alice? Why didn't she come with us?"

"She's gone," Eckhart replied. "She wanted to leave, so she took the *Marathon* and—"

"She took the *Marathon*!" Bing gasped.

"Did she steal it?" Dallas asked.

"Of course not. I gave it to her."

Rixby, Bing, and Dallas exchanged another, much longer glance.

"I know what you're thinking," Eckhart told them. "We can do this without Alice. I made her a promise that I wouldn't try to stop her from leaving, and that's exactly what I would have been doing if I told her I was in charge of Aistenz's fleet now. She wanted to leave, and I made it easy for her. Now it's on us to deal with the Regiment. We have all of Aistenz's power, and we have Akkek. That's enough."

"You're the boss, Eckhart." Rixby waddled over to the door, and Squids moved out of the way to let her by. "I'll be in the command center if you need me."

Eckhart faced Bing and Dallas. "Well? What do you want to do?"

"You know I'm with you," Dallas replied. "I just don't know how much good I'll be to you. This will be an air battle, and I can't fly."

"Well, you can," Bing pointed out. "You have your jet thrusters."

"You know what I mean."

"Actually," Eckhart interjected, "we have ground troops moving into position. We'll land them on Oiwei during the battle to overrun the station. I want you to lead the ground assault."

"Oh, yeah!" Dallas replied. "That sounds perfect."

"What about me?" Bing asked.

"We're going to send you undercover like you did with Vora."

"But the Regiment doesn't use Yakits," Dallas pointed out. "They don't let the alien scum—"

"Watch it, pal," Bing interrupted.

"The Regiment doesn't have to use Yakits," Eckhart replied. "They trade in stolen goods and illicit products."

"What do you have in mind?" Bing asked.

"You and I are going for a little ride. We're going to pull the same thing we pulled at Kukuri, but on a much smaller scale."

“How do you mean?” Dallas asked.

“I’ll take Bing to Oiwei and offer to sell him to the Regiment. That will get both of us onto the station to look for DeWalt while you organize the ground assault. Rixby can launch the air strike, and once we find DeWalt, Akkek will come in to deal with the Regiment for us.”

Dallas moved his head back and forth. “Do you honestly think that will work?”

“It’s got Eckhart written all over it,” Bing added. “It’s the most Eckhart plan that ever was.”

“Well?” Eckhart asked. “Can you see any flaws in it?”

“Besides the obvious stupidity of it all?” Bing asked. “Not really.”

“Does that mean you’re ready to go with me?”

Bing laughed. “Why not? If there’s a chance I could get killed in a blaze of gunfire, I’m right there.”

Eckhart beamed at his friend. “Thanks, buddy.”

“Where should I go to deal with the ground troops?” Dallas asked.

“They’re assembling on Tictus,” Squids interjected, “but they already have their own battalion commanders and generals.”

“Dallas is in charge of the generals as of now,” Eckhart ordered. “Bing and I will leave for Oiwei. We’ll send you a signal when we find DeWalt.”

“How will you do that?” Dallas asked. “You’ll both be under deep cover.”

“Rixby will bring the fleet to surround the station from the air assault. You’ll bring in the troops to surround the station on the ground. I’ll set off some kind of explosion to tell you when to launch the strike.”

“An explosion,” Bing muttered. “Of course. Why didn’t I think of that?”

“So Bing and I will need a ship—something that can’t be traced back to either the *Marathon* or to Aistenz’s network.”

“If I may make a suggestion,” Squids added, “we do have a few craft confiscated from Black Mountain. They’re still registered as belonging to the Lion Tribe.”

“That’s perfect. Let’s go.”

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8

Eckhart sat down at the pilot's station in a brand-new Sani-O9. He went through the controls while the ship's systems powered up and the computer system loaded.

The ship had a crunchy, never-been-flown-before feeling, probably because it had never been flown before Aistenz's people had brought it back from Rulara. It had gone straight from the factory line to a supply warehouse under Black Mountain.

All the Sani's systems worked perfectly. The ship didn't have that lived-in feeling of a vessel whose crew had been tinkering with it for decades, like the *Marathon*.

Eckhart put the *Marathon* out of his mind. He would never see the ship again, and definitely wouldn't fly it.

He didn't know what he would become or where he would end up if he survived this war against the Regiment. If this lunatic campaign succeeded, his name would become notorious on the fringes. He would never be anonymous again. He would never be able to walk into any bar or eatery anywhere without being recognized…and feared.

Maybe it would be better if he died in this war. He could certainly arrange that, if he really wanted to, or make it look like he was dead. The question was where to disappear after that. He wouldn't have many options after taking Aistenz Trotaer's place.

Bing jostled him and brought Eckhart back to reality. Defeating the Regiment was a long, long way in the future from now. Eckhart hadn't even begun to fight the Regiment, much less found a way to survive the consequences when he did.

He still hadn't attacked them. He was still unknown, still a nobody to everyone but his closest associates. Only Squids, the *Marathon* crew, and Akkek knew that Eckhart had taken over the empire.

Eckhart would like to keep it that way, but right now, he was on his way to strike the first blow. Once he got onto Oiwei Station and stole DeWalt back, Eckhart wouldn't be anonymous anymore. He would be the most wanted outlaw on the fringes, and that was saying a lot.

Bing sat down in the other seat at the Sani's controls. "How do I make myself look properly hangdog to convince the Regiment that you're selling me on the black market?"

Eckhart grinned at his friend. "You look hangdog enough already."

Bing snorted. "Okay. I walked right into that. I deserve it."

"Go sit back there." Eckhart jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "Strap yourself in, and, when I contact the sentry crossing, pretend you're struggling to get out of restraints."

Bing flailed his many limbs around. "Should I punch myself a few times and give myself a few black eyes to make it look extra convincing?"

"Only if you can do it without hitting me in the process." Eckhart pushed him away. "Get out of here before you hurt somebody."

Bing retreated, laughing, to the spare seats along the Sani's rear hull. He sat down, and a minute later, Eckhart heard the safety harness buckling without any punches, kicks, or other sounds of beatings.

Eckhart buckled up and switched the Sani's communications system to the *Atera*'s command channel.

"Sani *Scraizeal*, you are clear to launch," Rixby's voice chirped.

"Thank you, *Atera* Command. Keep the home fires burning."

"Have a good trip…and don't come back alone, *Scraizeal*."

"Understood. I won't come back without a nice, big present wrapped just for you, sweetheart."

Bing cackled with glee. "With a cherry on top."

High-pitched laughter broke out on the other end of the channel. "Don't get too carried away, *Scraizeal*. Just come back in one piece."

"Oh, I plan to," Bing replied.

Eckhart launched the Sani, but he didn't race away at top speed the way he would have if he'd been on the *Marathon*. There he went again, thinking about the *Marathon*. Where was Alice now—making the gangs of Parilia run away in fear?

He let his mind wander on the way to Oiwei. Bing didn't talk, either, until the officers at the station sentry crossing hailed Eckhart.

"Sani *Scraizeal*, Insignia QF-74843, state your origin and destination."

"Origin Dothea system, destination Oiwei Station."

The officer raised his eyebrows in obvious surprise. “State your business.”

Eckhart moved his communications system sideways to give the officer a view of Bing strapped into the seat behind Eckhart’s chair. “I have a Yakit to sell. They go for as much as twenty-five on the underground market.”

“We aren’t interested in live specimens. Move on.”

“They have healing properties,” Eckhart went on. “You can sell him for forty to the right buyer.”

The officer glanced up and took another look at Bing. Bing struggled against his harness, shot Eckhart filthy looks, and snarled under his breath before going back to trying to chew his way through the straps.

The officer looked over his shoulder at something off the screen. “Fine. Bring your cargo to the landing zone behind the foundry at 2100. Stand by to receive landing coordinates…and transmit data for anyone disembarking on the station.”

The officer cut the line, and Eckhart chuckled to himself. “You find them at every station. Money means more than their honor.”

“What honor?” Bing muttered. “You aren’t really going to sell me to that guy, are you?”

“For forty chips? I’d sell you to a buyer a lot worse than him.”

“I’m gonna make you pay for this, Eckhart.”

“Keep your pants on, pal. You’ll be living the high life in the medical kiosk while I scour this rotten station for someone they don’t want to be found.”

“Promises, promises,” Bing growled.

Eckhart transmitted the false identity data Rixby cooked up for him and received back coordinates for a parking space near the Datrium cistern.

Bing finally unbuckled himself and moved forward again. He squinted through the Sani’s front window at the dark and deserted corner. “Is this normal? Why are we landing *here*?”

“So Corporal Moneybags can meet us and buy you without his superiors seeing him.”

Bing made a face. “How do you know I’ll wind up in the medical kiosk? How do you know I won’t wind up on a slave scow on my way to Abix Plains?”

“Don’t worry so much. I’m sure our friend at the sentry crossing has already organized a buyer right here at Oiwei.”

“The more you reassure me, the more worried I get.”

Eckhart laughed again and shut down the Sani’s engines. He cut power to the whole ship so no one at Oiwei station would see him checking his weapons. He loaded his sidearm, but that was it. He left all the rest of his usual weapons behind.

“Where are you going?” Bing asked.

“I told you. I’m going to look for DeWalt.”

“Just like that? You’re just going to walk out and leave me here?”

“You were the one who was just complaining about going somewhere. Besides, you’re supposed to be a prisoner. Enjoy your last few hours of freedom and sit tight. We have a few hours to wait before 2100.”

Bing flopped down in Eckhart’s old seat. “At least once you sell me to someone else, I won’t have you yanking me around anymore.”

“If we’re lucky, I’ll find DeWalt now. Then, once we get rid of our friend the sentry, we can grab DeWalt and be out of here in no time.”

Bing grumbled something else and started messing with the Sani’s controls. Eckhart thanked his lucky stars he turned off the ship before he left, or Bing would probably fly away without looking back.

Eckhart turned his attention to the station. Where would the Regiment keep a prisoner as important as DeWalt? The Regiment at Kukuri had put Clifton and DeWalt in a secure biocontainment block, but they wouldn’t do the same thing here. Any specimen as dangerous as DeWalt would be under lock and key. Rixby had said DeWalt was highly classified. Where would the Regiment put someone like that?

Eckhart went over the Regiment’s station layout in his mind. These stations were all constructed the same way, no matter how far from Earth they got built. The Regiment wouldn’t house DeWalt anywhere anyone would know about.

That ruled out everywhere on the surface, everywhere an outsider like Eckhart would be able to find him. Eckhart kicked himself for not preparing better for this mission.

He needed Akkek for this, but she wasn’t here. She wouldn’t make herself known until the attack started…or at least, Eckhart assumed she wouldn’t come until then.

He decided to take a chance, and strolled into the barracks. He waltzed right into the canteen where uniformed Regiment officers and enlisted people talked and ate and shot the breeze.

Eckhart went over to the counter and got himself a pile of Golden Nugget bars—the best. Most people on the fringes would pay good money for these, and the Regiment ate them every day.

He turned to leave when three beefy privates blocked his way. They sneered at his clothes. “Who the hell are you?”

“Me?” Eckhart glanced over his shoulder at nothing. “I’m Adam Eckhart. I just pulled in with…well, you don’t want to know who I pulled in with.”

He sidestepped to bypass them, but they veered to get in front of him again. “I asked you a question, shithead,” the biggest one snapped. “Who the hell are you and what are you doing here? You aren’t Regiment. We know everyone in this sector and we don’t know you.”

“Then you don’t know as much as you think you do.” Eckhart let his eyes roam over the three men. He took in every detail of their builds, their weight, and their posture. Eckhart had been in too many bar fights to get ambushed by these morons. “This is the first time I’ve seen three privates in one place—oh, wait, except for this morning when I took a shower and washed my crack. You boys should try it sometime, ‘cuz…” He pretended to sniff. “It smells like it’s been a while.”

He turned his back on them and headed for the nearest table. Eckhart didn’t make eye contact with any of the dozens of people watching his every move and listening to his every word.

He carried his tray away to sit down at an empty place nearby. He kept his gaze relaxed right up until he saw four different people glance at a spot behind his head.

Someone’s shoe squeaked on the tile floor, and Eckhart didn’t wait to see or hear anything more. He whipped up his tray, and all his Golden Nugget bars scattered across the floor.

Eckhart let them fall, grabbed the tray in both hands, whirled around, and wound it back to plaster someone across the face. At that moment, someone leaped between Eckhart and the three charging privates.

Eckhart had to seriously hold himself back to stop himself from braining whoever it was. He pulled the tray to a standstill within millimeters of a head of brown hair.

The three privates skidded to a halt so fast the biggest one bumped into the mystery stranger. The privates' expressions changed even faster, and their murderous glares turned to colorless masks of sheer terror.

They collided with each other in confusion before they pulled up in front of the officer. Eckhart recognized the uniform even though he couldn't read the man's insignia from behind.

"Do you have a problem, Private Cantrell?" the man's voice boomed out.

Cantrell swallowed hard. "No, sir. No problem at all."

"It looks like you boys are finished eating." The officer's head snapped right and left to take in the whole idiot trio. "It looks to me like you boys are late to get back to work."

"Yes, sir," they all chirped at once, and beat it out of the canteen in a hurry.

The officer watched them go, and Eckhart's scalp prickled. Was it his turn next?

The officer spun around and pierced Eckhart with a sharp look. The name tag on his jacket read *Staton*. "I'm sorry about that, sir. Some of our boys are a little on edge right now, what with the unrest going on in this sector. It won't happen again. I promise you."

Eckhart's gaze dipped to the oak leaves on the man's shoulders and back up to the narrowed black eyes inspecting him at close range. Did a Regiment major just call Eckhart 'sir'?

Eckhart cleared his throat. "Thank you, Major. I'm grateful for your help." He shrugged, held up the tray, and bent down to pick up the Golden Nugget bars he dropped.

Major Staton squatted down next to Eckhart and started helping him pick up the bars. "You don't have to eat this stuff. Come with me to the officer's mess and I'll get you a decent meal."

Eckhart started to protest, but Major Staton didn't give him back the bars. He held onto them and didn't look in any danger of releasing them.

As the seconds ticked past, Eckhart finally took in what Staton had just said. Unrest? Did Staton mean the attacks on Black Mountain and Govax Station?

Eckhart would never find a better chance to get a firsthand glimpse inside the Regiment, so he cleared his throat again. "Thank you, Major."

“Follow me.” Staton led the way back to the counter, dumped all the Golden Nugget bars where Eckhart got them, and waved Eckhart out of the room.

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9

Eckhart and Major Staton entered a long corridor, and Eckhart tracked his own movements as he walked. “What was the unrest you mentioned? I heard someone attacked Govax Station and wiped out the whole contingent. I even heard the aliens got involved.”

“That would have been bad enough,” Staton replied, “but we’ve had word the aliens are mounting a much larger campaign against us—one that will range all over the sector.”

Eckhart raised his eyebrows. “Are you sure that report is accurate? The fringes have never mounted any resistance that big before.”

“We’re certain. It comes from a very credible source.”

“I wonder why I haven’t heard it, then,” Eckhart mused. “I have some very credible sources, too.”

Staton opened the door to the officer’s mess and held it aside for Eckhart to enter. Eckhart strolled between tables, couches, and nicely appointed armchairs.

Instead of a counter like in the barracks, the officer’s mess had a full kitchen with four uniformed chefs cooking real meals for the officers lounging around.

Staton motioned to a table, and he pulled up a chair across from Eckhart. Staton stuck out his hand. “Martin Staton—born and raised at Coleman Barracks, Mannheim, Germany. Where are you from?”

Eckhart thought fast for any place name he could remember from Earth—where didn’t matter. Staton would never be able to confirm it. “Adam Eckhart. Camp Humphreys, Anjeong-ri, South Korea.”

The two men shook hands, and Eckhart started to feel a twinge of guilt for deceiving the man who’d just stopped those privates from attacking him.

He felt even worse when Staton leaned in close and whispered under his breath, “I’d get out of the fringes as quickly as I could if I was you. It isn’t safe out here for Earthlings anymore.”

“What do you mean?”

“Whatever the fringe aliens are planning, it’s nothing compared to what the Regiment has planned for *them*. Oh, don’t look at me

like that! Everyone knows the Regiment has been planning a mass attack against the fringes for decades. It was only a matter of time before the aliens rose up to stop it from happening."

Eckhart gaped at the man in dumb astonishment. So a few smart people actually knew what the Regiment was up to. "So what are you going to do about it?" As if any major could do anything.

"I know why you're here," Staton whispered. "You came to sell us that Yakit, and we're grateful. We can hardly get bandages delivered out this far, and if the reports are true, we're going to need all the help we can get when the first attack comes."

Eckhart gulped to get his throat working. He never thought he'd hear those words coming from a Regiment officer. "What attack?"

Staton winced. "Govax was just the first. We're the next remotest station on the way out to nowhere. Where do you think the aliens will hit next? It has to be us, and then…"

Staton broke off and leaned back in his seat when two chefs came over to the table. They placed spotless white china plates in front of Eckhart and Staton. Succulent meat, steamed vegetables, and some kind of baked pie oozing with sauce and some stringy melted something or other spread across the plate.

Staton picked up his knife and fork. Eckhart had seen video footage of Earthlings eating like this, though he'd never done it himself. He always ate with his hands on Parilia. He'd been surviving on packaged rations and portable emergency food on the *Marathon* ever since.

He copied Staton and put some of the meat in his mouth. He struggled to hide his surprise at the juicy goodness of it. This was a thousand times better than anything he'd eaten in his life.

Staton didn't start talking again while they ate, and Eckhart didn't break the silence. Staton kept giving Eckhart meaningful looks, and even though it kept getting later and later in the evening, Eckhart didn't try to leave to rendezvous with Corporal Moneybags.

Whatever Staton was trying to tell Eckhart was way more important than selling Bing to the Regiment. Staton knew something—something a lot more important than some rumor about the fringe aliens finally paying the Regiment back for centuries of mistreatment.

Staton didn't pick up the thread of his warnings until after both men finished eating. The chefs returned and cleared the table. Staton thanked them by name and pushed back his chair.

Eckhart shadowed him out of the room. Staton wanted to tell him something. He must be taking Eckhart somewhere private where no one would overhear.

Staton only made it a few yards down the corridor before he towed Eckhart into a supply room. He pushed Eckhart into a corner and rushed Eckhart, whispering fast.

"Listen! You deal in illicit slave traffic, don't you? You must if you're running around with a Yakit for sale. I need a favor—a big favor. I can't pay you, but it's important, and you'll make plenty of money on the other end. I know where you can find a payload worth a hundred chips—maybe more. I know it's asking a lot, but you'd have to steal this payload from the Regiment. It's a risky job—way riskier than a hundred chips—but all our lives depend on getting this person off the station as quickly and as quietly as possible. I'm begging you. The aliens will target this station to get him back. Shit, they'll track him anywhere in the galaxy. None of us will be safe until the aliens take him back, and no one can take him but you. I've been waiting for weeks for someone to come along who could pull a job like this, and you're the closest trader I've found. What do you say? Please. It's a matter of life and death."

Eckhart blinked once. Staton could only be talking about one person. "Where is he?"

Now it was Staton's turn to blink, and Eckhart watched the other shoe drop when Staton finally comprehended that Eckhart already knew about DeWalt.

"He's…." Staton rasped. "He's in a classified bunker under the station. No one knows he's there except the highest brass."

"How do *you* know about him, then?"

Staton made a face. "Are you kidding me? There are no secrets on stations like this. We couldn't prepare the men for all-out war against the fringes without someone leaking why."

"Do you know how to get him out?" Eckhart asked. "Here's guessing he isn't standing around unguarded."

"That's the thing!" Staton whispered. "He *is* unguarded…except for a science team experimenting on him. We've had classified prisoners housed here before—ones under heavy guard. The whole station has to be at a heightened alert level when one of them is here, and enlisted security has to be assigned to the bunker. No one can keep it a secret, but this guy… He has no guards! He can probably come and go anytime he wants to."

Eckhart turned away and paced deeper into the supply room. He raked his fingers through his hair, taking all this in.

This was so, so much worse than he ever anticipated. Why wouldn't the Regiment bother to guard DeWalt? He must be cooperating with them, which meant DeWalt would be helping the Regiment fight the fringe aliens.

Crap! Eckhart's mind spun for some way to pass the message to Akkek and the *Atera*, but he couldn't do that as long as he was still on this station. He'd come here to get DeWalt away from the Regiment. Now what the hell was he supposed to do?

Staton checked his watch. "I have to get back to work before someone figures out I'm gone. I get off duty at three o'clock. I'll meet you at the medical kiosk and I'll show you how to get down into the bunker, but I won't be able to go any further than that. I could be up in front of the goddamn firing squad for even telling you about this, but it's the only way to stop all these people from getting killed. I mean, shit! The Regiment wants to use this guy to slaughter billions of aliens. If that isn't worth the job, nothing is, right?"

Eckhart nodded stupidly. "I'll take the job. I'll get him out of here, if I can."

Staton gave him a weak smile. "The medical kiosk at three. Remember."

"I won't forget. Thank you for telling me."

Staton hurried away, and Eckhart headed back to the Sani. He still had to meet Corporal Moneybags about Bing, and now Eckhart's plan to sell his friend to plant Bing in the medical kiosk had gone right out the window.

He needed to keep Bing with him. Eckhart needed one person—just one person—to come with him when the shit started flying. He couldn't face this alone.

He would give anything to have Alice and Dallas with him now, but he never would have been able to bring them to a Regiment station. No one in their right mind would believe an Earthling could sell a Bion, and Dallas would attract too much attention.

Eckhart had one other serious problem to work out on his way back to the Sani. If and when he called in the fringe assault against Oiwei station, Staton would get caught in the crossfire.

Eckhart didn't cherish any illusions about what would happen once Aistenz's fleet *and* the fringe troops *and* Akkek Stratha started

shooting at this station. He'd seen it all happen at Govax, and with so many more aliens joining in, Oiwei would only go worse for the Regiment.

Eckhart made up his mind on the way back to the Sani. He wouldn't leave Staton here to die.

Staton might be the one Regiment officer in the whole damn galaxy with a conscience. That earned him some special treatment, and now Eckhart owed him one—more than one. Staton had even mentioned stopping DeWalt from wiping out the aliens. That made Staton one hell of an unusual Earthling.

Eckhart stepped inside the Sani, and stopped.

The ship was empty. Bing was gone.

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10

Eckhart stormed over to the weapons locker and yanked out four rifles. He loaded them fast, hung two across his chest, and barged out of the Sani.

He shot an enraged glance to right and left. There was no one around. Whoever took Bing had completely disappeared.

He set off at a fast clip toward the medical kiosk. If those bastards had taken Bing there, Eckhart would blow the whole damn place to kingdom come to get him back.

Eckhart already knew whoever took Bing wouldn't take him to the medical kiosk. No one would break into a stranger's ship to steal a Yakit if they wanted to use him in a Regiment medical kiosk.

No, whoever had taken Bing planned to sell him on the slave market. A Yakit was worth too much to keep on a Regiment station, no matter what Staton said.

The kidnapper would have hidden Bing somewhere. Damn it! Now Eckhart had to find two people no one wanted to be found.

To hell with DeWalt. Eckhart couldn't go anywhere until he got Bing back. He would delay the assault for the rest of eternity until he satisfied himself that Bing wouldn't be in danger of getting injured or killed in the bombardment.

He strode past the medical kiosk, squinting through the windows. Of course Bing wasn't there. Bastards!

Eckhart's mind spun off somewhere else. He couldn't track down Corporal Moneybags. That asshole worked at the sentry crossing in orbit over Oiwei, where Eckhart would never be able to reach him. Corporal Moneybags better not have taken Bing up there, or Eckhart would—

Torturous fantasies flooded Eckhart's head. He barely noticed when a troop of security personnel marched around the medical kiosk's other side. They halted in front of Eckhart and blocked his path.

"Hand over your weapon, sir!" the sergeant in charge ordered. "Civilians aren't permitted weapons on this station."

"Get your sad, sorry asses out of my way," Eckhart snarled. "You do *not* want to mess me with right now, Sergeant. Trust me."

The sergeant held up his weapon. “Stand down, sir! Put your weapons on the ground, turn around, and put your hands above your head.”

Eckhart gritted his teeth. He didn’t have time for this shit. He tightened his grip on his rifle to shoot down the whole troop when a piercing scream echoed across the landing zone adjacent to the medical kiosk.

Eckhart looked toward the sound and every nerve tensed. He knew the sound of a Yakit in pain, and from the way Staton was talking, there could only be one Yakit on this station.

The sergeant looked away at the same moment, and Eckhart reacted in a split second. He drove his rifle stock hard into the man’s nose and then bolted behind the medical kiosk. The security troop gave chase, but Eckhart had already ducked into the shadows and vanished into the station’s forgotten recesses.

He sprinted to the landing zone in time to see a bunch of Regiment personnel standing guard around an Angkarn ZK-82 attack barge. Behind them, a shaggy bunch of Regors fought some struggling aliens into the hold.

Eckhart caught one glimpse of a head with multiple eyes and a whole cluster of whipping tentacles. Another scream split the darkness.

Eckhart jerked his rifle to his shoulder and barged onto the landing zone. He took aim for the biggest Regor when the security troop burst out of an alley not far away.

The security personnel veered in front of Eckhart to stop him. The Regors turned around, and Bing’s terrified eyes found Eckhart.

Eckhart paid no attention to the security personnel. They meant nothing. He trained his weapon on the nearest Regor, and Bing broke free. He floundered between the other prisoners, trying to reach Eckhart, but at that moment, a ground-shaking explosion erupted from the station’s farthest side.

Everyone whirled around as a mounting column of flame lit up the night sky. A siren started wailing in the distance, and trucks and emergency aircraft swarmed toward the explosion.

Eckhart spun the other way, and his gaze met Bing’s. Eckhart didn’t know what had caused that explosion. What caused it didn’t matter. Aistenz’s forces would see it. They would assume Eckhart was calling the assault.

Bing leapt away toward the Datrium reserve. “Let’s get the hell

out of here!"

"No!" Eckhart grabbed him and towed him back. "Not yet!"

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Bing shrieked. "This whole station is about to be—"

An answering boom finished his sentence for him. A gargantuan battlecruiser plunged out of the atmosphere, firing Triorium shots all over Oiwei Station.

The barracks detonated in an unholy crash and the whole station disintegrated in chaos. The Regors started hauling their prisoners on board. The security troop scattered. Spacecraft launched in all directions, only to get cut to pieces by Aistenz's fleet dropping out of the sky.

Eckhart hauled Bing across the exposed landing zone. The two friends dodged exploding spacecraft under heavy fire from the invading fleet.

Eckhart pulled up in front of the medical kiosk, and Bing shrieked again. "Are you insane? You can't send me in there *now*!"

"I don't want you to go in there! I need to find someone—" Eckhart cast around desperately, but Staton was nowhere in sight. He wasn't supposed to meet Staton here for hours.

No way could Eckhart find Staton on Oiwei Station now. Staton could be dead already.

Eckhart hesitated another beat and turned back to the landing zone. "Come on. This is pointless."

He cast one backward glance and started forward. He didn't have to pull Bing anymore. Bing went ahead of him on the way back to where they'd left the Sani.

Eckhart walked faster. He had to get back to the fleet to tell Akkek what he'd found out about DeWalt, but at that moment, the *Paostea* plunged overhead and pounded the medical kiosk with Triorium fire.

The building imploded, and the shockwave knocked Eckhart and Bing face-first onto the tarmac, with waves of fire licking over their heads.

Eckhart pulled Bing to his feet, but before they could go anywhere, a whole cluster of Regiment ships veered over the landing zone, trading shots with Aistenz's battleships.

The air battle raged over the landing zone, and every time Eckhart tried to push for the Sani, another catastrophic blast pounded into the tarmac in front of him.

Chunks of concrete and asphalt splintered into Eckhart's face. He threw his arms in front of his eyes and tried to retreat, but more strikes kept tearing the station apart everywhere he turned.

He tried to run to the left only to bump into Bing trying to head left. They floundered together for a minute, until Eckhart finally seized Bing and dragged him struggling all the way toward where the medical kiosk used to be.

Eckhart picked up speed, getting farther away from the landing zone, but when he got near the barracks, he ran into platoons of Regiment soldiers armed to the teeth. They formed ranks in front of the barracks all facing the same way. Eckhart's stomach dropped into his boots when an absolutely massive horde of aliens swarmed out of the darkness. They came from hundreds of species, and they had such an insane variety of weapons that even Eckhart struggled to identify them all.

These aliens wore mismatched armor and helmets, but the murderous fury in their eyes could never be denied.

They surged onto the station, running straight into the Regiment ranks, and Dallas' glistening body shone in the starlight leading the charge.

Screams broke out in the ranks, and some of the soldiers ran even before they engaged the enemy. Eckhart's blood ran cold at the sight of the alien mob closing on the Regiment troops. How much time did he have left to find DeWalt before Akkek showed up?

Eckhart had to work fast. He backed Bing away from the impending battle. Being near it would only make finding Staton even harder.

Eckhart prodded Bing back toward the officer's barracks. He couldn't think of anywhere else to look for Staton, but when he turned around the launch terminal, someone collided with Eckhart running the other way.

Eckhart grabbed Staton's shoulders. "Hey! It's me! I was looking for you."

Staton gasped, and his eyes raced around the station going up in explosions all over the place. "Thank God you're here! I've been looking everywhere for you!"

"Take me to the bunker—now!"

"But what about— If we hand him over to the aliens—"

"Just take me there!" Eckhart yelled over the mounting noise.

“I’ll make sure he gets to the right place.” Staton hesitated again. “Trust me, Martin.”

Staton checked himself and then nodded. “Okay. Follow me.”

The three men took off at a run. Bing leaned in and whispered in Eckhart’s ear. “Who the hell is this guy?”

“Someone who’s on our side.”

Eckhart didn’t say anything more. He was too relieved to find Staton. He would almost rather leave without DeWalt than leave Staton behind after the risk the officer took to stop the Regiment’s plot.

Staton ran back to the officer’s mess. He charged down the long corridor where he’d first asked for Eckhart’s help.

Staton went into the mess and then into another kitchen behind it. Pots of stew puffed steam from the still-lighted burners. Frying pans issued smoke into the air, with no one attending them. All the chefs had fled.

Staton crossed the kitchen, opened a different door, and let himself into what looked like another supply room. He made sure to shut and lock the door behind Bing. Staton showed no sign at all that he recognized Bing as an alien, nor did Staton act surprised that Eckhart had brought Bing with him.

Staton moved some mops and brooms out of the way. He took some rotten old towels off the rail to reveal what looked like an electrical circuitry box.

He opened it and started working on a security code panel hidden inside. He entered a number code, a motor switched on somewhere out of sight, and the whole room dropped.

It purred downward at a slow, steady rate. The three men held their breath until it banged to a stop some distance below.

“We’re there!” Staton whispered. “The bunker is reinforced for seismic activity, so the science team should still be down here. They aren’t authorized to move the prisoner, even in the event of an all-out assault.”

Eckhart didn’t know what to expect once he got out of this room, but Staton acted like this was all normal. He unlocked the door and led Eckhart and Bing out into another corridor exactly like the first.

They passed down it to where the officer’s mess would be on the upper levels. Staton walked right in, with Eckhart and Bing behind him.

Eckhart stopped dead in his tracks when he saw DeWalt. The banker sat on a stool at a normal wooden table. DeWalt played cards with a few Regiment soldiers, and they laughed and talked in friendly tones.

The science team tapped at their computers and workstations across the room. They didn't go near DeWalt, but they kept shooting glances toward him and his companions as if he was a rat in a very comfortable lab. Another door stood open across the lab. It led into a nice apartment with a bed, a small kitchen, and a few other amenities.

Staton, Eckhart, and Bing watched the scene from a distance. Eckhart didn't know what to do. He'd never expected to find DeWalt so comfortable, but that must explain why the Regiment didn't feel the need to guard him. DeWalt looked like he was having the time of his life.

No one moved for a second while Eckhart decided what to do. Was Akkek upstairs right now, razing Oiwei Station to the ground?

The instant Eckhart thought about Akkek, DeWalt's head snapped up. He jerked around in his seat and narrowed his eyes at Eckhart.

Goosebumps erupted on Eckhart's arms as a searing charge of some wordless understanding passed between him and DeWalt. DeWalt recognized him. Eckhart could never be in any doubt about that.

A split second later, the lab and all its comforts blurred. Eckhart had experienced this enough times with Akkek to not be surprised by it now, but it happened so fast that it took Staton, Bing, and all the lab personnel aback.

An instant later, an invisible force dropped Eckhart back on the tarmac by the landing zone, with Bing on one side and Staton on the other.

Regiment vessels exploded through the night sky. Aliens and Regiment soldiers fought hand-to-hand all over the station as one building after another detonated in flame and destruction.

Dallas stormed across the battlefield with gunshots bouncing off his armor. He mowed down hundreds of Regiment soldiers with his assault guns and left carpets of bodies in his wake.

The moment Eckhart's feet touched the pavement, a blazing supernova of light burst in the heavens overhead. It burned with the blinding intensity of a small star suspended over Oiwei. The outer

margin enclosed the black shape of a woman inside it.

Eckhart kept telling himself, *Run! Get back to the Sani and get out of here,* but he couldn't move.

Akkek hovered over the station, firing lasers with punishing speed. They rained on the station, picking off Regiment ships, storehouses, weapons placements—everything.

Bing grabbed Eckhart's arm and woke him from his trance, but when Eckhart started forward, another light split the night. It hurtled into space on a dead course for Akkek.

The new missile collided with her, and both mythical beings exploded in a starburst that lit up the station as bright as day. The flare cleared to reveal two identical halos locked in a death struggle in space over the station.

DeWalt was fighting Akkek

"Shit!" Bing husked.

"What the hell is that?" Staton whispered.

"Come on!" Eckhart grabbed Staton's arm. "We gotta run for it!"

Staton stumbled after him. The three men veered around the wrecked remains of ships lying torn and useless on the tarmac. Eckhart wove between craters and piles of rubble.

He made it as far as the Datrium reserves when Akkek and DeWalt screamed overhead. They crossed thousands of miles, plowing ships out of the way. They punched through a Colossus, and the ship imploded in a deafening shockwave.

Akkek and DeWalt vanished behind the horizon. Only the burning Colossus gave Eckhart enough light to see where he was going. He raced around the Datrium reserve to where he'd parked the Sani.

He steered Staton toward the hatch, but when they got near it, the same two shooting stars came screaming back around the other side of the planet.

Eckhart caught one glimpse of two black shapes tumbling over and over inside one combined halo of spraying lasers. A laser sliced into the Datrium reserve less than fifty feet from the Sani, and a sickening groan resounded inside its metal skin.

The next moment the halo slammed full tilt into the Sani and obliterated it from existence. Eckhart dove in front of Staton and Bing. He forced the two men back just in time before the blast wave smacked him between the shoulder blades.

The impact flung all three of them away, but it was too late. An

earth-shaking boom vibrated inside the Datrium reserve. A monstrous plume of fire rippled toward Eckhart's head.

He stared at it, trying to get his brain to come up with some option to get him and his friends away from it. His addled senses recognized shapes and faces in the flames widening to swallow him.

Staton made a desperate, hopeless noise next to Eckhart's ear, and the next instant, an invisible hand yanked all three men off the ground.

Eckhart rocketed upward so fast his head spun. He twirled through the stars, not sure what was happening or where he would end up.

Some force beyond space and time flung him headlong toward Aistenz's fleet. He rocketed toward the *Atera* as the battlecruiser led the air assault against the station.

Before Eckhart could even think to stop himself, he crashed through the hull and landed hard on his side in the command center.

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11

Eckhart groaned and rolled onto his knees. Rixby waddled over to him and helped him drag himself to his feet. “What happened?” she squeaked. “Where’s DeWalt?”

“You don’t want to know,” Eckhart growled.

He looked around and spotted Staton lying unconscious on his back behind the command podium. Staton had fallen across one of the steps, and his spine twisted at a strange angle.

Eckhart went over to him, but Bing got there first. “You do your job, pal. Leave him to me.”

Bing bent over and spat a massive blob of Eplite into Staton’s mouth. Eckhart didn’t wait to see any more. He stepped onto the podium. “What’s the situation?”

“The station is destroyed, but…” Rixby broke off. The combined light of Akkek’s and DeWalt’s power still hurtled back and forth across the scene of destruction playing out on the ground.

Akkek and DeWalt wavered in front of the *Atera*, still raging and battling each other in matched ferocity—at least, it looked like they were matched. Eckhart couldn’t see what was going on with so much light flickering around their shadowy forms.

“Find Dallas,” Eckhart ordered. “Tell him to pull back the ground troops. We’ve done enough damage.”

“Pulling back now,” Rixby told him. “There are eleven Colossuses holding out at a secondary sight on the other side of the planet. They’re the last ones.”

“Set course for—” Eckhart began, but at that moment, something smashed through the ceiling and slammed down on the floor.

A curtain of dust and scrap showered to the floor. Several of the bridge staff screamed and leapt out of the way. Rixby squealed and spun around.

Everyone stared at Akkek and DeWalt wrestling and tussling on the floor. Neither of them burned with any supernatural light now. They didn’t spit lasers all over the place. They were just normal people—one Earthling male and one Akeix female.

They grappled on the carpet, snarling in each other’s faces.

DeWalt got the upper hand right away and clenched both his hands around Akkek's throat. He bared his teeth and roared in fury, trying to choke the life out of her.

Eckhart moved forward and ran into an invisible field blocking him from reaching the pair. He couldn't intervene. No one could.

Akkek reared off the floor and clubbed DeWalt hard across the ear. He howled and she tossed him off. She strapped her legs around him, knocked him to the floor, and pounced on him.

He reacted instantly by levitating off the carpet, carrying her with him. He turned back the other way, clamped one hand around her throat, whirled sideways, and smashed her back into the command podium.

"DeWalt!" Eckhart yelled. "Leave her alone! She was helping us rescue you. She helped us get you away from the Regiment. She's our friend."

DeWalt turned his crazed eyes on Eckhart, and Eckhart froze. He didn't know this man at all. All trace of the spineless banker Eckhart had known was gone. This wasn't Coleman DeWalt anymore—not the Coleman DeWalt Eckhart knew. It certainly wasn't any Coleman DeWalt he ever wanted to save.

DeWalt held Akkek there in a bone-crushing grip. Akkek choked for air and kicked to free herself, but to no avail. She clawed at his arms and tried to drag his hand away from her neck, but nothing broke his iron hold.

Her eyes glazed and her face started to change color, but DeWalt still never took his maniacal gaze away from Eckhart. DeWalt's fiendish countenance twisted in a sadistic leer while he strangled the life out of Akkek.

Eckhart struggled to come up with something to say to get through to DeWalt, but no words came to his mind. Everything he could think to say depended on his past relationship with DeWalt, on reminding DeWalt of the times when Eckhart had helped him in the past, and of their time together on the *Marathon* and beyond.

None of that meant anything now. DeWalt might not even remember any of that, or care about it if he did.

Eckhart's eyes darted over to Akkek's swollen face. DeWalt would kill her any second now, and there was absolutely nothing Eckhart could do to stop him.

All hope of saving the fringe population would die with Akkek. Eckhart might as well give up this whole futile mission. No one

would be able to defeat DeWalt. The Regiment had won.

Akkek flailed her arms in one last effort to save herself. She struck out at DeWalt's head and body, but her fists went straight through him. He'd disintegrated his body and head, but not the arm and hand crushing her throat. Whatever the Regiment did to him, they had perfected it so that he had become effectively untouchable —even more untouchable than Akkek.

She went limp in his hand. Her arms and legs flopped, and her head lolled to one side. Her eyes lost their luster, but DeWalt didn't release her.

He turned his head to stare at her, and at that moment, something rocketed past Eckhart's peripheral vision. It hit DeWalt side on and tackled him to the floor.

Eckhart couldn't move. He stared at Clifton's scrawny frame sprawled across DeWalt on the command center floor.

The two men somersaulted head over heel and slammed into the wall. DeWalt lifted off the floor, body-slammed Clifton, straddled him, and wound back his fist to smash Clifton's brains out.

The whole scene froze in a timeless moment of stunned impossibility. DeWalt hissed through bared teeth, glaring down at Clifton's drawn, bony face. Clifton stared up at his former boss in stark, staring terror. That insane, inhuman glint in DeWalt's eyes didn't recognize his own friend…or did it?

Clifton gasped a few times before he finally found the voice to make himself heard. "D-De-DeWalt…What…are you…doing?"

DeWalt panted down at Clifton, and spittle popped between his bared teeth. He still held his fist upraised, but he didn't strike.

The knuckles of his left hand went white holding Clifton down on the ground. Clifton didn't have the strength to fight DeWalt. If Akkek couldn't fight him, Clifton didn't stand a chance. One punch would finish him.

Clifton's bravery snapped Eckhart out of his stupor. "You don't want to do this, DeWalt. You're on the wrong side. The Regiment is only using you. They want to turn you into a weapon of mass annihilation."

Bing appeared at Eckhart's side and interrupted what Eckhart was about to say next. "Do you remember me, DeWalt? I'm Bing. I saved your life on the *Marathon* when we first found you on OSMZ. Do you really want to help the Regiment kill *me*, too?"

Eckhart's heart twisted. He couldn't say it better, and he sent up

a silent prayer of gratitude to Bing for saying it instead.

DeWalt's crazed eyes darted around the bridge. "Don't do this, DeWalt," Clifton panted. "This isn't you. You couldn't hurt all these people, and you couldn't hurt me. Look at me, DeWalt. Look at me."

DeWalt took a long time to drag his wild gaze over to Clifton's face. The instant their eyes met, something changed. Eckhart didn't have time to see what it was before DeWalt vanished. He disintegrated and left Clifton lying there on the floor.

The moment DeWalt evaporated, Eckhart rushed over to Akkek. She lay slumped against the command podium, but she was still breathing.

Her eyes rolled up to his face. "Eckhart…I'm sorry…"

"Stop it," he whispered. "You were spectacular out there."

"You don't understand…how strong he is…I tried…everything…"

"Don't worry about him." Eckhart looked up, and Bing came over.

"I'll take her down to the medical bay," Bing murmured. "Don't worry. I'll fix her up."

Eckhart gripped Bing's shoulder. He didn't know how to express his gratitude for Bing's help in getting through to DeWalt.

Bing carried Akkek off the bridge, and Eckhart went over to Clifton. He grasped Clifton's hand and pulled Clifton to his feet. "Thank you," Eckhart breathed. "That was incredible."

Clifton shrugged. "It didn't work, did it? He didn't listen to me."

"He listened. You're the only person alive who could have gotten through to him, and you did."

"What now?" Clifton glanced over at the bridge staff watching him. The whole place was full of aliens—all except Staton.

Eckhart had to smile at this man. "It looks like you're back on active duty, Captain."

Clifton snorted, but he stopped short of actually smiling. "It looks like it, doesn't it?"

"Stick around. You're our resident expert on DeWalt, so your place is here."

"I don't know anything about him. He isn't the man I knew. He's some kind of demon now. He looks the same, but the man I knew is gone."

"I know. I felt the same way, but we have to find a way to get him back. We have to find a way to make him remember who he

is."

"How?" Clifton asked.

"I don't know, but whoever he is and whatever he is, we can't let him go through with this. We have to find a way to stop him, no matter what. Convincing him to switch sides is the easiest, 'cuz I'll be honest with you, I sure as hell don't want to fight him."

Eckhart started to turn away, and found himself face-to-face with Staton. Staton looked around the *Atera*'s bridge and then his shocked, horrified gaze came to rest on Eckhart. "Who…who the hell are you?"

Eckhart took a step toward him. Staton had recovered from whatever happened when he fell across the steps. Bing was good for that. Now Staton finally started to realize where he was and who exactly had rescued him from the battle.

"You know who I am," Eckhart replied. "I'm the guy you asked to take DeWalt away from the Regiment. That's what I'm doing. We've been searching for him. He's our friend, but the Regiment has been messing him up. We want to stop him from killing the fringe aliens, and we'd rather not kill him in the process if we can help it."

Staton looked around one more time. Eckhart was the only other Earthling on the bridge besides Clifton. That was one extra Earthling than Clifton and DeWalt had met on the *Marathon*, but Eckhart still recognized that look of petrified, disgusted horror in Staton's expression.

Staton got over it a lot quicker than Clifton or DeWalt had. He compressed his lips, cleared his throat, and straightened up. He tugged his uniform into place and did his best to throw back his shoulders. "All right. What do you want me to do?"

"We can't send you back to the Regiment. I'm sorry, but the next time we go near a Regiment station, we'll be attacking it, not dropping you off."

Staton nodded with difficulty. "I figured that might be the case."

"Then the only question is how much you're willing to help us. You know the Regiment better than any of us, but I understand if you want to stay loyal to them. I won't make you cooperate. You can stay here, as long as you don't try to stop us."

"Stop you!" Staton gaped at Eckhart in blank shock. "Why in the world would I want to *stop* you? I put my life and my career on the line to get him off Oiwei Station. I would have taken him myself if I

could only figure out how. Why would I want to stop you? I can't stand this. I can't sleep at night thinking about what they planned to do with him, but I'm only one man. I couldn't do anything except try to find a way to return him to the aliens."

"If you feel that way, we'd be happy for any help you can give us."

"You mean…" Staton blinked at Eckhart and then looked around again. "You mean you aren't going to kill me?"

"Why would I kill you? I was looking for you to take you off the station. I didn't want to leave you behind after you told us where to find DeWalt."

"But don't you…you're an—not an alien, exactly, but you…you work for them. You're an Earthling, but you work for the aliens."

Eckhart had to chuckle. "I don't work for the aliens, pal. I work for myself. These people are my friends. They're my family. I was born and raised on the fringes. I wanted to be an alien from my earliest memories, but it was just my bad luck that I wasn't born one. I hold a lot more loyalty for these people than for any Earthling."

Eckhart watched the truth sink into Staton's brain, but Staton couldn't stop gawking at all the aliens around him. Staton even looked that way at Clifton.

Eckhart sighed. This business of taking over for Aistenz was turning into something much more serious than he'd anticipated.

He turned to Rixby who, like the rest of the bridge staff, stared at him and the two Earthlings with the same stunned, frozen horror as Staton looked at them. "Where's DeWalt now?"

She squeaked and scurried around on her workstation. "He's on his way to Nenus Station. The surviving Colossuses from Oiwei are going that way, too."

"Nenus, huh?" Eckhart rubbed his chin. "Interesting."

"What do you want us to do?"

"Contact Dallas for me. Reassemble all the ground troops at Tictus with all their gear."

"They're already there."

"Good. Bring the whole fleet into formation with the *Atera* and take us back to Tictus to rendezvous with the ground force. I'm going down to see Akkek. Can you hold the fort here for me, sweetie?"

"Of course," she chirped. "I'll let you know if we need you."

Eckhart nodded and waved at Clifton. “Come with me. You, too, Staton.”

Staton hesitated and shot one last wary glance at the bridge staff. He opened his mouth like he might actually have the balls to ask if Eckhart trusted these aliens to run the ship for him.

Eckhart stepped into the elevator. Staton and Clifton entered the elevator, and the doors shut. The car dropped on its way to the medical bay.

He couldn’t get over the irony. He was alone in a room with two other Earthlings. He couldn’t remember a time in his life when that had happened before, except for the time when Clifton and DeWalt first came on board the *Marathon*.

How simple and straightforward life seemed back then. No one expected Eckhart to save billions of people back then. Hardly anyone even knew his name, and he liked it that way.

Those days were all gone now. Today sealed his fate. He couldn’t go back. The whole bridge staff saw him giving orders to reassemble Aistenz’s forces at Tictus. They saw him doing all of that without discussing it with Aistenz or Squids or anyone. They couldn’t fail to get the message.

Eckhart had to find out how Akkek was. He couldn’t make any decisions until he found out whether he could rely on her power in the future.

He let his thoughts drift, but Clifton brought him back. “I’ve been thinking.”

“Not again!” Eckhart teased.

Clifton only smiled. “I’ve been thinking you’re right.”

“We all know that, pal.”

“Stop it, Eckhart. This is serious. I’ve been thinking you’re right that it would be better to get DeWalt back on our side rather than fight him.”

“Yeah, well, we can’t get him back on our side *without* fighting him, can we?”

“Maybe *I* can. Maybe if I talked to him again—sometime when he isn’t in such a deadly mood. Maybe I could convince him to do the right thing.” Clifton shrugged. “If anyone can convince him, I can.”

“How do you plan to get close enough to him to convince him without getting yourself killed? If he remembers enough to remember he’s supposed to work for the Regiment, he’ll remember

enough to realize you're on the wrong side."

"Maybe. You're pretty good at sneaking in and doing things behind enemy lines. Maybe I could do the same thing. I'm an Earthling. I can get inside Nenus Station. I can find DeWalt and do what you tried to do at Oiwei."

"It's too dangerous, and you don't look like a Regiment officer anymore, my friend. I'm sorry to be the one to break it to you, but you look more like an alien now. Just ask our boy Staton. He'll tell you."

Staton jolted. "Don't ask me anything! I don't know anything."

"I mean it, Eckhart," Clifton insisted. "It's our best way of finding DeWalt."

"If you went into Nenus Station, I'd have to come with you. I sure as hell wouldn't send you in there alone."

"What about me?" Staton interrupted. "I could go with him."

"You're wanted, buddy," Eckhart told him. "If helping us at Oiwei didn't earn you a life sentence at hard labor, fraternizing with the enemy will definitely do it. You're now officially one of the bad guys, and you're way too recognizable. The first sentry who spotted you would blow you out of the sky."

Staton shrugged. "It was worth a shot."

"I'll go with you," Eckhart told Clifton.

"Don't you want to ask your people if that's okay?" Clifton asked. "They might not want you risking yourself like that, especially if you plan to bring this whole force against Nenus at the same time."

Eckhart laughed. "You're starting to sound like one of them. Let's find out what Akkek's condition is and then we'll talk, but I can tell you now that Bing will definitely not want to come to Nenus with us."

The elevator stopped, and the three men got out in the *Atera*'s medical bay. Bing and several other Yakits worked over numerous injured aliens. Akkek lay on an exam table in the corner, forgotten by everyone. She had her eyes closed, and she looked asleep.

"How is she?" Eckhart asked Bing.

Bing shook his head. "I think you'd better go talk to her. She's pretty messed up."

"Messed up how? Did you fix her neck?"

"There's nothing wrong with her neck." Bing nodded toward Akkek's bed, but he didn't go over there. "Go on. She needs to talk

to you right now."

Bing wouldn't say any more, so Eckhart, Clifton, and Staton went over to Akkek's side.

Eckhart clasped her hand. "How ya doing, girl?"

Akkek choked, compressed her lips. "It's all gone, Eckhart! He took it all!"

"Took what?" Eckhart asked. "Who took what?"

"DeWalt!" she said. "He took all my power! I can't disintegrate anymore! I don't even know if I can disguise myself anymore. I'm stuck like this for life. I can't help you! I can't fight the Regiment. I'm useless! I'm sorry, Eckhart. I don't know what to do!"

Eckhart didn't trust himself to speak. All gone! All her power, gone. Now what?

She was the only person who could hope to stand up to DeWalt. Eckhart had worried about what would happen if DeWalt killed her, but this turned out to be so much worse.

He didn't dare to ask how DeWalt had done it. This must have something to do with the experiments the Regiment did on him since they got DeWalt back in their hot little hands. They could have done anything to him. They could have infected him with any number of unstoppable weapons.

"I don't know what to do, Eckhart! I can't leave the *Atera*. I can't fight him. I can't help you with this war. I wish I could, but what good is a powerless Akeix anyway? I'm so sorry. I've betrayed the whole fringe population."

"You didn't do any such thing!" he murmured. "We're only here now because of you. You gave us our best shot. No one expects you to do more than that."

"Of course they do! Don't lie! You wanted me to defeat DeWalt."

"Then we'll just have to find another way."

"There is no other way. If I can't beat him, we might as well take the fleet back to the fringes and disappear. We'll all just go back to the way things were before."

"No," Eckhart snapped. "We won't do that. We can't. The Regiment is inches away from using DeWalt against us. We already launched this campaign, so they won't stop until they retaliate. You attacked Govax, and I attacked Oiwei. DeWalt knows about us now. If we don't finish this, he'll come after us, and the whole fringe population will suffer. I'm not going to let that happen, and *you're* not going to let that happen."

“I can’t do anything! I wish I could, but I can’t.”

“That isn’t true. You’re Akkek Stratha. You’re the greatest thief that ever lived.”

“I did all that because I’m an Akeix! I can’t do anything without my power to change my appearance.”

“I don’t think so. You might not be able to change your appearance, but you still remember how to trick people once your appearance has changed. We can change your appearance, and then you can do the same thing without your power. You can still help us, and we still need you.”

“I’m not so sure…”

“I am. Now listen to me. Bing just told me that there’s nothing wrong with you. Your neck is okay, which means you can leave the medical bay anytime you want to. I want you to come with me and Clifton here. We’re going to Nenus to get DeWalt, and we need you to help us.”

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12

Clifton stepped into the elevator at Eckhart's side. "Are you sure this is a good idea?"

"I'm sure it *isn't* a good idea," Eckhart replied. "That's what makes it…what did Bing say? He said it was the most Eckhart plan that ever was."

Clifton laughed much more easily now. "That sounds like a disaster in the making."

"It will be, but hopefully, it will be a disaster for the Regiment instead of us."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to play it your way. DeWalt didn't attack you. He recognized you as a friend."

"Actually, if you remember, he *did* attack me. He just didn't kill me."

"Actually, if *you* remember, you were the one who attacked him. He would have killed you if he didn't recognize you as a friend."

"So what am I supposed to do?"

"Just talk to him, like you said. He fought Akkek because she was capable of fighting him. He saw her as an enemy and he treated her as one. He was out of his mind on adrenaline and endorphins when he threw you on the ground. Maybe you can reason with him if you get him at a calm moment."

"How are we going to find him without another Staton helping us?"

Eckhart shrugged. "I guess we'll figure that out once we get on the ground. All Regiment stations have the same layout. Maybe, by some miracle, Nenus will have an identical bunker underground where they're housing DeWalt."

"That's beyond a miracle. That's pure fantasy, my friend."

Eckhart laughed back at him. "You're probably right, but then again, getting through to DeWalt is pure fantasy, too."

"And you still want to go through with it?"

"Sure. I don't see any reason to launch this war without trying every other possible option first."

Clifton faced the front of the elevator. "You're right."

Eckhart studied Clifton's profile. "What you did on the bridge was heroic. I'm ashamed to say I didn't think you had it in you."

Clifton still didn't look at him. "You're doing more than anyone to stop the Regiment, Eckhart. If anyone is a hero, it's you. No one can praise me for following your example."

"I'm not a hero, pal. I'm a criminal, and now I'm taking Aistenz Trotaer's place. I'm the biggest criminal on the block."

"That doesn't stop you from doing the right thing, does it? You're the one convincing all these people to follow you so you can stop the Regiment's plan. No one else is doing that. You are. That makes you a hero. You're a hero to all these people—all the fringe aliens. Don't you see the way they look at you?"

Eckhart stared at a spot near Clifton's ear. He didn't hear the last part of Clifton's response. Eckhart's brain clicked, and everything fell into place.

He seized Clifton's shoulders. "That's it! Clifton, you're a genius." Eckhart dove in and kissed Clifton on the cheek without thinking about it. "I owe you big time for this, buddy. Thank you." Eckhart burst out laughing in excitement.

Clifton stared at him in something close to terror. "What's the matter with you?"

Eckhart couldn't stop laughing. "It's perfect! Why didn't I think of it before?"

"Because you're talking a bunch of bullshit. What the hell *are* you talking about?"

"It's so obvious! He said they heard all about it. I didn't understand at the time, but I do now." Eckhart attacked the elevator controls, and in the end, he wound up pulling the emergency stop to bring the elevator to a halt.

"You're out of your mind, Eckhart," Clifton muttered. "You're losing it."

"I must be." Eckhart switched the elevator back on and reprogrammed it to go back to the medical bay.

He found Bing talking to Akkek on her lonely bed in the corner. "Both of you are with me. Come on, Akkek. I need you to deploy right away."

"Deploy!" she repeated. "Deploy where?"

"I don't care. You go wherever you want to, as long as you leave right away. I need you to keep going with this mission of yours to mount an uprising among the fringe aliens. You did it on Imeliv H8.

You can do it again. You already know everybody."

"That was different," she replied. "I could turn myself into a member of any species. I could talk to them as one of their own species."

"They'll still listen to you. You don't have to talk to them as one of their own species. You can talk to them as Akkek Stratha. You represent resistance against the Regiment, and you can tell them all to rise up. They'll follow you. The Regiment can't defend itself against so many aliens all fighting together."

"That might be true, if only the Regiment was fighting the fringe aliens," Bing interjected, "but the Regiment has DeWalt now. He can wipe us all out in one stroke, no matter how many aliens we bring against the Regiment."

Eckhart burst into a huge grin. "But they aren't going to have DeWalt. DeWalt won't be fighting for the Regiment, because our boy Clifton here is going to win him over to our side."

Akkek and Bing both looked at Clifton. "How are you going to do that?"

Eckhart clapped Clifton on the back. "He's going to do it by using his winning charm and stunning good looks."

Clifton blushed bright red and slapped Eckhart's hand away. "Knock it off, Eckhart."

Eckhart laughed again. He couldn't remember being this happy in a long time. "Listen. It's simple. Clifton and I will distract DeWalt at Nenus while you weaken the Regiment"—Eckhart thought fast—"at Guzion Station."

"You're out of your gourd!" Clifton whispered. "Guzion is the biggest Regiment supply depot on the fringes. It's the most heavily guarded station in the whole galaxy, outside the Earth system."

"Which is exactly why we need to hit it and take it down as soon as possible. With DeWalt out of the picture, taking out Guzion will weaken the Regiment more than anything else we can do. It's the perfect place to launch our campaign against Earth."

The others gawked at Eckhart like he had four heads. "You want to launch a campaign…against Earth?" Bing croaked.

"Of course. What better way to show them we're serious? If we stop short of Earth, they'll just send out more Regiment forces against us. Even if we defeated the whole Regiment, Earth would cook up another army to take us down."

Eckhart heard himself talking about the fringe alien population

as ‘us’ and ‘we,’ but that didn’t bother him anymore. He was talking to two aliens and another Earthling. *Alien* or *Earthling* no longer mattered. There were only two sides in this war: the Regiment and everyone else. Eckhart no longer thought that being an Earthling made him an outsider. He was on the right side. What species he was didn’t make any difference. What species anyone was didn’t make any difference.

Akkek blinked at him. “Okay. I guess we can do it.”

He touched her elbow. “Come down to the landing platform with me. You can take one of the Velocities and go…wherever it is you’re going.”

“What do you plan to do once you get your alien army inside the Earth solar system?” Clifton asked. “Earth won’t listen to you. They won’t negotiate with aliens.”

“That’s what they think. They’ll have no choice once we finish off the Regiment. We could drive them all the way to the rings of Saturn and they wouldn’t be able to ignore us anymore. We would force them to negotiate.”

“You’re a dreamer, Eckhart,” Bing countered. “Earthlings hate aliens with a passion. They’ll never negotiate.”

“Then we can post our ships around their system and leave them there. The aliens can claim the fringes, and Earthlings will be confined to their own little corner of the galaxy. They’ll have to learn to live with less while we ride off into the sunset.”

Clifton, Bing, and Akkek all cast sidelong glances at Eckhart, and he read the question on all their minds. He spoke about Earthlings as a different species from himself.

What would happen to him if he actually succeeded in confining Earthlings to the Earth solar system while aliens claimed the fringes for themselves?

Dallas could never go back to Earth, but what about Eckhart himself? Would he ever give up all this to go back to Earth the way Clifton had first suggested?

What would Eckhart be back on Earth? He could be whatever he wanted there. No one on Earth knew about his life of crime or his poor upbringing or any of the ruthless jobs he’d pulled in between.

Maybe he even had family back there. The thought sounded so strange. He couldn’t imagine a bunch of Earthlings sitting around trying to be nice to him.

He had a family, and they were all aliens. He had Rixby and

Bing and Alice and Dallas. He had Akkek and Squids and Innyria and all the other aliens he'd made friends with over the years.

He didn't feel strange thinking about spending time with them. He felt comfortable with them. He had nothing to hide from them and nothing to prove. He couldn't leave them for a bunch of strangers.

The four of them stepped onto the landing platform, and Eckhart escorted Akkek over to one of the Velocities. It was Squadron Leader Two—Alice's old ship.

Eckhart ran his hand down its sleek, silver side. He couldn't imagine a better ship for Akkek to take to trigger the alien uprising against the Regiment. The ship would launch a thousand rebellions—the one rebellion to end all rebellions.

"Are you sure you want me to do this?" she asked.

"I'm sure. The alien population needs to do this, with DeWalt or without DeWalt."

"What if you can't win him over? What if he turns on you?"

"Then Clifton and I will kill DeWalt."

Clifton gasped, and his jaw hit the floor. "We will? How?"

"I'm sure we'll find a way. I'll leave orders with Squids and Rixby to take the fleet to Guzion. They'll meet you there to launch the assault. We'll continue to fight until we get the job done. You leave DeWalt to us."

Bing shook his head. "This is suicide."

"Which is why we need Yakit standing by. You stay here, Bing."

"Oh, I don't plan to go anywhere. I'm all finished going undercover with you, Eckhart. You played your last sell-the-Yakit card."

Eckhart laughed, and Clifton and Akkek joined in. All at once, Akkek threw her arms around Eckhart's neck. "Thank you, Eckhart. You really gave me something to fight for."

"All right, all right. Get out of here and get back to Guzion on the double."

She beamed at him and climbed into the cockpit. She strapped herself in, still grinning in excitement while the Velocity powered up.

A second later, she rocketed out of the hatch and vanished. "You really are crazy, Eckhart," Clifton murmured. "You know that, right?"

"I might just be crazy enough to make this work. Come on. You

and I are late for Nenus.”

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13

Eckhart checked all the controls on his Velocity. “Squadron Leader One ready to launch on your command.”

“Stand by, Squadron Leader One,” Rixby chirped. “Coordinating with Tictus now.”

Eckhart pricked up his ears. “Is everything under control there?”

“Affirmative, Squadron Leader One. Tictus is mobilizing for Guzion Station now.”

Eckhart relaxed and went back to his pre-flight checks. He did his best to calm the adrenaline eating away at his guts.

He was about to go out against DeWalt with nothing but a wing and a prayer. Maybe Bing and Clifton were right, and this was the stupidest plan he’d ever come up with.

Clifton’s voice came from the seat behind Eckhart, bringing him back to the present. “Any word from Nenus, Rixby?”

“Regiment records list Coleman DeWalt registered and deployed on the station, Squadron Leader One. He’s there waiting for you.”

“Yay,” Clifton muttered to himself.

“You’re clear to launch, Squadron Leader One,” Rixby told Eckhart. “Tictus mobilized and en route to Guzion.”

“Launching.”

Eckhart punched the throttle, and his Velocity hurtled out of the *Atera*’s hatch. He plunged into open space and pulled the ship on course for Nenus Station. He and Clifton had a date with DeWalt.

He barely got his ship turned around when a catastrophic explosion blasted the world apart right next to his head. He whipped around in time to see the *Paostea* erupt in flame.

“The *Paostea* is hit!” Rixby screeched in Eckhart’s ear.

“It’s more than hit!” Clifton countered. “It’s gone! What the hell is going on, Command?”

“I don’t know!” she squealed back. “There’s nothing there!”

Eckhart searched the darkness on all sides. He didn’t see anything either—until a second later, when the next ship in line exploded in a deafening boom.

The impact struck Eckhart’s Velocity hard to starboard. He scrambled to stabilize the engines and, at that moment, a blinding

light flashed in the blackness right next to the *Atera*.

"No!" Clifton whispered.

"Launch all squadrons!" Eckhart ordered. "Arm all battlecruisers and attack! Fire at will—Triorium drive—all ships!"

Eckhart jammed the throttle down, driving the ship straight for DeWalt, but he already knew it was useless. The whole power of Aistenz Trotaer's fleet couldn't stand against DeWalt.

At the same instant, a giant hole ripped in the fabric of space and disgorged a massive fleet of Colossuses and Banshees. The Regiment tore through the gap and launched a punishing assault against the alien fleet.

"How did they find us?" Rixby shrieked.

Eckhart didn't answer. He already knew how DeWalt had found them. He must have tracked the fleet the same way Rixby tracked him to Nenus Station.

DeWalt hung suspended in space, spitting lasers everywhere. The Regiment ships launched into the fleet, shooting fast. Only the alien fleet's Triorium drive saved it from the onslaught.

Eckhart dove into the mix, shooting everything in sight. He spotted DeWalt between blasts. Eckhart tried to get near him, even though he couldn't do anything against DeWalt. This wasn't the way he'd envisioned winning DeWalt over to his side.

Eckhart couldn't get near DeWalt, no matter what he tried. The Banshees kept dodging into his path. He thought at first it was just random battle confusion. After a few minutes, he had to admit they were deliberately protecting DeWalt. The Banshees did the same thing to every other ship on the field, including their own.

Eckhart made another circuit of the battle, firing on every Banshee in sight. Each fleet battlecruiser launched its fighter squadrons until the Velocities outnumbered the Banshees, but still no one could get close enough to land a shot against DeWalt.

DeWalt hung in one spot. His black shadow flickered at the center of a blinding halo throwing off hundreds of lasers.

DeWalt targeted the *Atera* specifically, and the ship's Triorium drive deflected most of his shots. The *Atera* rotated backward and trained its guns on DeWalt, but the burning ring of light around him absorbed every blow.

Eckhart veered between two Colossuses. He glanced right and left and saw his chance. No Banshees were near enough to block him.

He gunned his engines and sprinted for DeWalt's halo. Eckhart had no idea what he would do if he got through, but it didn't matter in the end.

The Velocity struck the halo, and a crushing smack sent the fighter reeling backward. The Velocity smashed into the *Atera*'s hull. The fighter's hull creaked, and tearing sounds set Eckhart's teeth on edge.

"Squadron Leader One, report!" Rixby screamed in his ear. "Squadron Leader One, do you read?"

"I'm… We're all right, Rixby," Clifton replied. "Eckhart! Are you hurt?"

"I'm…" Eckhart didn't finish speaking before a curling lick of power unfurled from DeWalt's ring.

It coiled around the Velocity and ripped it off the *Atera*. DeWalt didn't move inside his protective bubble. That rippling tendril whipped the Velocity back over DeWalt's head and smashed it down even harder against the *Atera*'s unforgiving sides.

"Squadron Leader One!" Rixby screeched.

The instant the Velocity's crumpled form hit the ship, DeWalt yanked it back for the second time. "Okay!" Eckhart yelled. "Time for Plan B!"

"Which is what, exactly?" Clifton hollered back.

Eckhart's head reeled as DeWalt hauled the Velocity back for another brutal strike. "Fall back, *Atera*! Get out of range."

"No!" Rixby shrieked.

"Get out of here!" Eckhart bellowed. "That's an order!"

The *Atera* reacted instantly. It skidded away from DeWalt, and he hurled the Velocity into a patch of empty space.

The fighter wheeled ass over teakettle, spinning away from DeWalt. Eckhart made a snap decision and hit the engines with every particle of speed the fighter still had.

The ship didn't respond very well with most of its hull smashed in, but it was better than nothing. He limped off into the battle and buried himself in the confusion, but it couldn't last. DeWalt knew where he was.

Everything DeWalt did told Eckhart that DeWalt was coming after him in particular—him and Clifton. DeWalt was out for blood. Why? What had the Regiment done to turn DeWalt against his former friends? How could they affect such a stunning change in personality?

The instant Eckhart got his fighter stabilized and hidden behind several Colossuses, DeWalt came after him again. An invisible force shoved the Colossuses apart to leave a clear path between DeWalt and Eckhart's ship.

Eckhart tried to veer away, but his damaged engines, wings, and hull wouldn't obey him. The ship staggered and juddered, trying to respond to his directions.

DeWalt sailed between the Regiment ships, pushing Banshees and Velocities out of his way. He repelled every Velocity that tried to come near him.

Eckhart pushed his fighter to the breaking point trying to duck behind the line of Colossuses. He needed one hiding place to regroup before he faced DeWalt again, but nothing slowed DeWalt's advance.

DeWalt pushed aside the Colossus right in front of Eckhart's Velocity, and Eckhart came face to face with DeWalt. At that moment, a screaming alarm went off somewhere on Eckhart's instruments.

"We got a problem, pal!" Clifton yelled. "Hull depressurizing on the port…I mean…hull depressurizing all over! The Velocity is imploding!"

"We're coming to get you, Squadron Leader One!" Rixby squeaked in Eckhart's ear. "Just hang on."

"Stay out of this, Command!" Eckhart ordered. "Keep the *Atera* out of the firing line."

"Negative, Squadron Leader One. No can do. Just—"

A groan trembled through the Velocity. It vibrated into Eckhart's seat, and breathable gas started venting through the breach.

Eckhart tried to tear his eyes away from DeWalt gliding closer by the second. DeWalt nudged all the ships on the field out of his path and left Eckhart and Clifton sitting stricken right in front of him. DeWalt's halo kept spitting lasers at every other ship within range, but for some reason, he left this one Velocity alone.

Eckhart stared through the glass at the black outline of a man hidden under flashes and flaring light. That shadow in there was not the man Eckhart knew.

That black shape wasn't the man who'd armed a pounder to save the *Marathon* crew from destruction. That wasn't the man who saved Dallas and the others from the Regiment. No way. It couldn't be.

The DeWalt that Eckhart knew would never turn against the *Marathon* crew. The DeWalt that Eckhart knew would never raise a finger against Clifton—not ever.

That black shape wasn't DeWalt. It was some chimera cooked up in a Regiment lab. It was the sum total of the Regiment's murderous hatred of everything alien. Eckhart couldn't think of that thing as a man, because it wasn't anymore. It was inhuman.

DeWalt floated to a standstill right in front of Eckhart's cockpit. Eckhart felt Clifton go still and quiet behind him. Only the alarm disturbed the unnatural silence while both men waited for DeWalt to strike the killing blow.

Did DeWalt even remember Eckhart at all? Eckhart couldn't see any face or expression. Maybe DeWalt didn't see Eckhart. Maybe he only saw an enemy.

Another roiling vine of light and fire uncoiled from DeWalt's halo. It snaked through space, crawling toward the Velocity, but at that moment, the *Atera* skidded between DeWalt and the crumpling fighter.

The battlecruiser slid into place so fast neither Eckhart nor DeWalt saw it coming. It whipped backward, training all its guns on DeWalt. At the same time, the open hatch swallowed the Velocity, and slammed shut with the ship inside it.

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14

Eckhart and Clifton sprang down from the cockpit and Eckhart raced for the elevator. “Quick! Get up to the bridge! We don’t have much time.”

“What are you going to do?” Clifton panted.

“God only knows, but we have to do something!”

Both men caught their breath on the way upstairs, but when the elevator opened in the command center, Eckhart walked out into a disaster beyond his wildest dreams.

DeWalt blazed in a supernova of light and power right in front of the *Atera*. Lasers pounded the hull and made such a deafening noise that Eckhart could barely hear Rixby screaming orders at everyone.

The *Atera*’s guns blasted Triorium ejections at DeWalt’s halo. The shots met DeWalt’s lasers in such a devastating discharge that Eckhart couldn’t even tell if they were doing any damage at all.

Eckhart leapt onto the podium and ripped the helm sideways. “Keep up your fire!” he yelled down at Rixby. “Don’t let up on him.”

The ejections exploded even stronger when Eckhart pulled the ship out of DeWalt’s path. He had to turn to keep up with Eckhart’s movements, and Eckhart saw his strategy working.

He veered the *Atera* back and forth in crazy random curlicues, avoiding as many of DeWalt’s lasers as possible. The noise of lasers hitting the hull diminished, but only slightly.

The maneuver gave the rest of the fleet new resolve, and they laid into the Regiment ships even harder. Squadrons surrounded Banshees, and several Colossuses ruptured in rebounding Triorium blasts.

DeWalt spun this way and that, trying to keep up with Eckhart’s wild contortions, but when DeWalt’s attack became less effective, he changed tack. He pulled to a standstill and no longer tried to keep up with Eckhart’s tricks. DeWalt’s halo exploded in an even more deadly fountain of lasers, but he didn’t try to hit the *Atera*.

He targeted every other ship in the fleet instead. He pounded the other battlecruisers, and the *Zagua* exploded, along with several

Velocities.

Eckhart took a split second to adjust to the new situation. He slammed the helm hard to starboard. The *Atera* reacted incredibly fast for a ship this size. He tried to zip between DeWalt and the next ship in line, but DeWalt only turned his fire somewhere else instead.

The next barrage ripped the port engine off the *Kestera*'s wing, and DeWalt started on the forward hull right on top of the bridge. Communications squawked down the line from somewhere across the bridge from Eckhart's podium. He had to do something before DeWalt ate through the entire fleet.

Rixby screamed something else, and Eckhart gunned the engines to get between the *Kestera* and DeWalt, but DeWalt flicked the *Atera* out of the way with no effort at all. DeWalt didn't even turn his attention away from his project of destroying the *Kestera* one hull panel at a time.

Eckhart scrambled to come up with some way to stop the slaughter when, for no particular reason, DeWalt turned his head and looked right at the *Atera*.

Eckhart still couldn't see any of DeWalt's features, and DeWalt couldn't see Eckhart through the *Atera*'s hull. Even so, Eckhart got the unnerving sensation that DeWalt was looking straight at him.

A charge of some indescribable emotion passed between the two men. DeWalt knew exactly who was piloting this ship. DeWalt knew who Eckhart was, and DeWalt was doing all of this to get to Eckhart. He would bet his life on that.

Eckhart's stomach tightened when he realized. DeWalt would destroy the whole fleet in front of him. DeWalt would make Eckhart watch his last hopes die of ever stopping the Regiment. Eckhart couldn't defeat the Regiment as long as they had DeWalt. The whole project was nothing but a hopeless fantasy.

Another crushing boom resounded through the *Atera*'s hull as the *Kestera*'s starboard wing tore off in a hail of lasers. The *Kestera* staggered to a halt and turned its Triorium blasts on DeWalt.

More shots erupted from the *Atera*, and the *Sitera* joined in from across the battle, but nothing touched DeWalt inside his impenetrable bubble.

DeWalt brought his lasers together in one searing jet of fire. It slammed into the *Kestera*'s bridge when, without warning, another ship rocketed past the *Atera*'s nose. It hit the laser and took the shot

square on its Celdian shields.

The *Marathon* whirled on the spot as lasers deflected in all directions. Eckhart stared at the ship in stupid shock. It couldn't be, but it was.

At the same instant, thousands of ships materialized out of thin air. Eckhart had been so consumed with the battle that he didn't see them approaching.

They swarmed into the battle from all sides. They enveloped the Regiment vessels and blocked every other ship from going anywhere. In half a second, no one could move as every kind of ship mobbed the Regiment.

Eckhart's gaze darted across his instruments trying to see something, anything. DeWalt still hung unmoving in front of him, but all his power couldn't penetrate the *Marathon*'s shielding.

"Target that asshole!" Eckhart yelled. "Triorium ejections—full spread!"

"Yes, sir!" Rixby squeaked, and the *Atera*'s guns opened fire.

More Triorium bombardments blasted from all sides. Eckhart took a minute to realize they weren't coming from Aistenz's fleet. They were coming from the alien ships that rode to the rescue. Only one other group on the fringes used Triorium drive.

The Jackal Clan was here.

The Jackal Clan wasn't the only criminal organization helping out. The Chosen, Silent Death, and the Immortals were all here, and several Megaliths had even showed up to join the battle.

Eckhart looked up at the *Atera*'s guns pounding DeWalt's halo. A second later, what looked like a comet smashed into DeWalt and hurtled him out of sight. That flash filled the bridge, and everything went suddenly silent.

Eckhart's ears popped, and something crashed down on the carpet right in front of his podium. Five people piled on top of DeWalt, but he didn't fight back. He collapsed on the floor, and his sweat-soaked head lolled to one side. He was out cold.

Akkek shot Eckhart a wild grin and dragged herself out from under her companions. She was drenched in sweat, too, but the insane grin of pure thrilling happiness on her face filled Eckhart's heart with light.

She wiped her hands on her pants and stepped over DeWalt's limp form. "It was only temporary, Eckhart! It's all back—every bit of it."

Eckhart frowned down at DeWalt, still lying under the four strangers. “What the hell did you do to him?”

“I took his power just like he took mine. He’s harmless—for now, at least. I don’t know how long it will last, but don’t worry. We can subdue him if he fights back.”

Eckhart looked over at the other four. They started to peel themselves off DeWalt, too, and they looked around the bridge with as much interest as the bridge staff looked at them. “Who’s we?”

Akkek waved to her friends, and Eckhart saw, as they all straightened up, that all four were Akeix like Akkek—three males and one female. “This is Miklon, Brophus, Angethea, and Vimhan.”

“Yeah, but how did you…?” Eckhart waved at DeWalt. His brain didn’t seem to work anymore.

Akkek cackled in insane glee. “Isn’t it great? I gave each of them a blood transfusion. They have all my power.” Akkek grabbed Eckhart by the shoulders and shook him. “This is gonna be great! The Regiment doesn’t stand a chance against five of us!”

Eckhart stared at her. “Five of you? Are you saying you…?” He pointed at the other four.

“They have all my power. I transferred the virus to all four of them. Don’t you see, Eckhart? It doesn’t matter anymore if DeWalt is on the Regiment’s side. We can beat him. We can beat them all! We’re going all the way to Earth!”

Eckhart struggled to get his brain in gear. One Akkek was bad enough, but five of them?

Just then, DeWalt groaned on the floor and started to wake up. The five Akeix rounded on him, but Clifton shoved them out of his way.

He knelt down next to DeWalt and pulled DeWalt toward him. “DeWalt! You’re all right, buddy. You’re among friends.”

DeWalt moaned again, turned his head toward the familiar voice, and opened his eyes. He looked up at Clifton and then glanced around. All the venomous ferocity Eckhart saw at Oiwei vanished in a flash.

“Clifton,” DeWalt husked. “What’s going on? Where are we?”

“Get Bing up here on the double,” Eckhart ordered.

DeWalt glanced up at him. “Eckhart? What are you…where… what’s going on?”

Eckhart moved over behind Clifton. “What’s the last thing you remember, buddy?”

“I was on the…” DeWalt furrowed his brow. “The last thing I remember was being on the *Marathon*. We were in the infirmary, and I was talking to Bing about…”

“We aren’t on the *Marathon* anymore, man,” Eckhart told him. “You’ve been in something like a coma.”

DeWalt ran his fingers through his hair. “I feel like shit.”

“You’re gonna be all right.” Clifton started to help DeWalt sit up. “You’re safe now.”

DeWalt looked around the bridge and frowned at all the aliens around him. “Rixby! You’re here. Where’s Alice and Dallas and…” Just then, Bing walked in, and DeWalt held up his hand. “No, Bing! You are *not* giving me any Eplite. I don’t care if I’m missing arms and legs. Forget it.”

Eckhart laughed. “It looks like DeWalt is back to normal.”

“Eckhart!” Rixby squeaked. “The *Marathon* is hailing us.”

“Put it through.”

Eckhart stepped back on the podium, and his throat seized up when Alice appeared in front of him. “You bastard, Eckhart! How could you let me fly away at a time like this?”

He couldn’t stop smiling at her. “I gave you my word I wouldn’t do anything to stand in the way of you leaving.”

“Is it true Aistenz is dead?”

Eckhart sighed. What was the point of hiding it anymore? “Yeah. He’s dead, and I’m in charge of his empire. We’re taking every alien vessel we’ve got to Guzion Station, and when we get rid of that, we’re going on to Earth.”

“Count me in,” Alice told him.

Innyria stepped up next to her. “Count me in, too, Eckhart. You didn’t think you were going to keep me out of this war, did you?”

“It looks like all your old bosses are here anyway, brother.”

“Are you sure you don’t want the *Marathon* back?” Alice glanced around the *Atera*’s bridge and snarled through her mask. “That ship doesn’t suit you.”

“No,” he told her. “The *Marathon* has a new crew, a crew that will do it justice. You two stay where you are and follow us. We’re on our way to rendezvous with Dallas and the rest of the army.”

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15

Eckhart pulled Bing aside. “Take Clifton and DeWalt down to the medical bay. Give DeWalt a full checkup and make sure there’s nothing physically wrong with him. Keep an eye on him, and let me know if he shows any sign of reverting to his old ways.”

Bing shot a sidelong glance at Clifton. “That dude isn’t exactly 100%, either, you know.”

“Maybe not, but he wants to fight. He has as much right to take part in this war as the rest of us, and I’m not about to turn away Earthlings who want to join us.” Eckhart lowered his voice even further so no one would hear him. “We might need them in the end.”

Bing studied him on the side. “What did you have in mind? You *are* an Earthling. Whatever you want them to do, you could do yourself.”

Eckhart tried to laugh it off. “What’s the matter? You’re the one who’s always saying I’m an honorary alien.”

“Joke about it all you want, but you know it’s true. You want Clifton and DeWalt to negotiate with Earth, but there’s nothing stopping you from doing that. You’re as Earthling as they are. If you want an Earthling to face Earth, you should be the one, not them. You’re the one who speaks for the fringes, not them.”

Eckhart winced. “I don’t speak for the fringes, pal.”

“And they do?” Bing made a face. “Please, Eckhart. Everyone here admires you. Everyone here follows you, not them. There’s no one here who could do what you’re doing.”

“Why does everyone keep saying that?” Eckhart teased. “You make me out to be some kind of messiah figure or something.”

“No. Just a person—a person like all these aliens. Everyone on the fringes knows you. Everyone on the fringes knows you’re one of us. Clifton and DeWalt are outsiders. They’re strangers. They came on board the *Marathon* hating aliens.”

“They changed. They don’t feel that way now.”

“You never did, though, did you? You wished you were an alien. You might as well be one, in the eyes of the fringes. You’re the only person in the whole galaxy qualified to negotiate with Earth.”

Eckhart tried to shrug the suggestion away. He didn't want to be this person, but he already knew he was. He'd started to become this the moment Aistenz died and it only got stronger as time went on.

He already knew Bing was right. The fringe aliens would never accept Clifton and DeWalt speaking on their behalf. They wouldn't accept anyone who wasn't one of them, and no alien could make Earth listen to reason. Only Eckhart could do all that.

He didn't want to talk about it. He didn't want to think about it. "Just take care of them, will you? I have to talk to Akkek and her new friends. Then I'll come down to the medical bay and touch base with you."

Bing walked away, and a moment later, he escorted Clifton and DeWalt out of sight.

"Eckhart!" Rixby called again. "Dallas is contacting you. He says the ground troops are stationed in orbit around Guzion. Dallas is en route on a Varun MFS-695 to meet with you about plans for the attack."

"Good. Invite the leaders of the Jackal Clan, Chosen, Silent Death, Immortals, and Megaliths over to *Atera* for a council of war."

Rixby, the Akeix, and most of the bridge staff spun around to stare at him. "You want to invite them *here*?" Rixby squeaked.

"Yes, I do. Now send the message, Rixby, and tell Alice to come, too." Eckhart turned to Akkek. "I want you to attend the council with me."

"Why? We aren't in charge of anything."

"You should still be there. You five are practically an army of your own."

Akkek grinned at him. "Okay. If you insist."

He tapped her elbow. "Come here. I want to talk to you before they get here."

He led her and the other Akeix into the conference room off the bridge. "What's up?" Akkek asked.

"I know you five are stronger than all our forces, but I want you to hold back. I want you to…well, basically, I want you to do nothing while the fringe aliens wipe out Guzion."

"You don't want us to do anything?" Akkek gasped. "What's the point of having us on your side if we aren't going to help the rebellion?"

"You're our ace in the hole. You're the ones who will make sure

we don't lose."

"We can't lose," Miklon interjected. "The fringes are too strong even without us. We could have steamrolled the Regiment a long time ago if we'd only worked together, but we're working together now."

"We outnumber the Regiment by thousands of ships," Brophus added. "They don't stand a chance."

"Just listen to me," Eckhart replied. "Earth and the Regiment and all the Earthlings in the world need to get it through their heads that the fringes are stronger—so much stronger that Earth can never mount another campaign to conquer us. They need to understand that we're an unstoppable force. Once we beat them, they need to realize that it's a decisive win, and that all the fringe aliens worked together to drive Earth from the fringes. We won't be able to send that message clearly enough if only five people carry out the victory."

The Akeix studied him with their heads on one side. "You *are* an Earthling," Miklon finally pointed out.

Eckhart sighed and his chin fell on his chest. "I know I am."

"Yet you speak of the fringe aliens as though you're one of them."

"I *am* one of them. My heart belongs to the fringes, and I won't quit until we finish this. Earth and the Regiment need to understand that it was the fringes—all of us—that said, 'No more.' They need to see us united, and they can't do that if you're fighting the war for us." Eckhart held up his hand. "All I'm asking is that we keep you in reserve. If, by some chance, the battle turns against us, we'll bring you in to wipe the floor with the Regiment's bloody carcass. You can handle that, can't you?"

Akkek giggled. "I think we can handle that."

"Thank you…and thank you for defeating DeWalt. I'll be forever in your debt for that."

Just then, Rixby interrupted. She waddled into the conference without waiting for permission. "The leaders are approaching, Eckhart, and Alice and Dallas just pulled in."

"Good. Rixby, you and Akkek come with me."

They rode down to the landing platform, and Eckhart suffered another overwhelming tide of emotion when he saw the *Marathon* sitting there.

Alice strode up to him. "What's this about meeting the other

gangs for a council of war?"

Eckhart laughed with difficulty. "Why do you think I asked you to come? I need protection."

"You need more than a bodyguard, Eckhart. You need a decoy if you plan to take over for Aistenz."

"I'll work on that."

The hatch boomed open, and Eckhart's party moved out of the way to make room for the Varun coming in to land. Dallas tromped to the floor, barged up to Eckhart, and threw his arms around him. "Here's the big boss."

Eckhart patted Dallas on his armored back. "That's you, man. How's the army?"

"Chomping at the bit. When can we attack?"

"As soon as we coordinate with the other gangs. Alice says I need a bodyguard, so maybe you'd like to stand in front of me to stop them from shooting me."

Dallas laughed. "I'm afraid not even an anionic elasticity quantatid could protect you from that, but if it helps us launch this attack faster, I'll do my best."

The signal went up for the hatch to reopen, and Eckhart pulled Dallas closer. "Maybe you could stand next to me and make me look well protected for when they get here."

Dallas laughed again and rumpled the fur on Rixby's head. Then, to Eckhart's relief, Dallas really did move in closer and stand guard over him. Eckhart would need a bodyguard at least as big as Dallas to intimidate these gangs.

Alice, Rixby, and Akkek came forward and planted themselves on Eckhart's other side. He saw them treating him like some kind of criminal dignitary, and he experienced another surreal wave of cognitive dissonance. This wasn't him, but in a way, it had been him all along. This was the new him.

Three more ships glided toward the hatch from out in space. They migrated into the *Atera*'s landing platform and lowered their landing gear.

Before they touched down, the elevator opened and Squids stepped out. He approached Eckhart's side and positioned himself at Eckhart's right elbow. Now the entourage was complete.

The first two ships opened their hatches, and different aliens descended to the platform. A gigantic Vaatune lumbered to the floor, looked around, and glared at Eckhart with dark, brooding

eyes. A moment later, a disgusting greenish-blue creature stepped down from the other craft. Tentacles extended from its face in undulating waves and stretched toward Eckhart.

Eckhart cringed when the two aliens met up and exchanged a few murmured snatches of conversation before they approached him together.

"Eckhart," the blue one exclaimed. "I never thought I'd see you alive again."

"You wished you didn't, you mean, Vuldak. How many people have you swindled this week?"

Vuldak laughed. "I save the romantic evenings for you, Eckhart. You know you're my favorite mark, but I guess you don't feel the same way about me. You never come to Chanus K4 anymore."

"I hope I never get back to Chanus K4 again. Believe it or not, I don't enjoy eating Datrium for breakfast, Vuldak, no matter what your other girlfriends tell you."

"Always the same old Eckhart." Vuldak glanced at the people standing guard on both sides. "So it's true. You're taking over for Aistenz Trotaer. I had to come just to see it for myself. I wouldn't have believed it otherwise."

"You can believe whatever you want, as long as you help us defeat the Regiment." Eckhart glanced over at the Vaatune. "Are you representing the Chosen, Vuldak?"

"Of course. Who else do you think they would send?"

Eckhart shrugged. "Someone reliable."

Vuldak exploded in laughter. "Someone reliable would hardly represent them." He slammed his hand down hard on the Vaatune's shoulder. "This is my friend and associate, Yocoi. He's representing Silent Death."

Eckhart started to bow. "It's an honor to—"

Someone touched Eckhart's arm. He glanced sideways, and Akkek gave him a very slight shake of her head.

His head swam trying to understand what she meant, but he hesitated too long. The Vaatune rushed him before he even finished thinking about it. Alice brought her sidearm up to aim at the creature, but a split second later, Dallas slotted out his assault gun and blasted the Vaatune's head off.

The enormous body hit the floor, and blue-black blood gushed over the platform. Vuldak sprang away in a heartbeat. "What are you doing? You'll bring Silent Death down on all of us! Are you

insane? You can't just shoot their representative. You'll spark a civil war that will destroy everything."

"That Vaatune did not represent Silent Death," Akkek interrupted. "The Vaatune have been mortal enemies of Silent Death for generations. The only question is how involved you were in this trick, Vuldak."

Vuldak stared at her, then glanced at Eckhart, and finally changed his expression when he realized Alice and Dallas were both still holding him at gunpoint.

"They threatened me," Vuldak grumbled. "The Vaatune said they would kill me and steal all my assets if I didn't help them get near you. They knew I did business with you in the past, Eckhart."

"So they wanted to assassinate me. Is that it?"

Vuldak nodded down at the floor. "They wanted to put their own man in Aistenz's place. I'm telling the truth, Eckhart. You can check with the Chosen Council on Chanus. They really did send me, and they can vouch for the threats."

Eckhart glanced down at Rixby. "Can you confirm this?"

She waved her antennae at him. "There are records of Vaatune transports to Chanus H8 in the last week. They're the only known records of Vaatune traveling to Chanus H8 in all of recorded history. Whatever made them go there, it must have been pretty important."

"How did they find out I was taking over for Aistenz?"

"That might be my fault," Akkek said. "I kind of spread the word when I was rallying everyone to mount the rebellion. I had to tell them. They wouldn't rally around Aistenz. I had to make them understand there was a new man in charge of Aistenz's empire, and that Aistenz's forces would be working for everyone on the fringes, not just to enrich your pockets."

Eckhart puffed out his cheeks. "All right. You can stay, Vuldak, but if you pull any funny business, your life is forfeit. Understand?"

Vuldak nodded at his own shoes. "Yes, Eckhart. I understand."

"Come over here and stand next to Dallas. We'll need to find another representative for Silent Death."

Dallas cocked his head. "Wait a minute, Eckhart. I'm receiving a message from General Borzi on Tictus. The Silent Death representative is on his way now."

"Really? Where is he, then?"

"The Vaatune detained him. He's on his way and offers his

apologies and all that."

Alice groaned. "This could take ages."

Two more ships approached the hatch and landed together. "Who do we have this time?" Eckhart murmured to Rixby.

"Not sure," she chirped back. "That one there is a Hilkut transport. I can't think which of the gangs would have a Hilkut working for them."

"I guess we're about to find out."

Both vessels opened to reveal their delegates. The Hilkut walked with a long, loping stride, and its athletic body bounced with every step.

The creature thrust out a hand to Eckhart. "Eckhart! It's good to see you again. I always knew you would come out on top."

"Welcome, Namol. Did you get bored of working as Fomfron's bodyguard?"

Namol laughed. "I killed him and took over the Ziqin system in his place…a little like you did with Aistenz." Namol glanced sideways at Squids. "Maybe you had help on the inside with that."

"Maybe I did. Are you representing the Jackal Clan?"

"Indeed. None of those dunderheads is smart enough to link two sentences together, and when they heard you killed Aistenz Trotaer, they were all too petrified to face you." Namol burst out in a deep, throaty laughter. "They always were cowards."

"That should make them easy for you to control."

"Exactly." Namol turned around as the third representative approached. It was Rory Vagill, one of the notorious Vagill brothers from the Ingrins system. Dickat Norheall stayed close to Rory's side, and when they presented themselves in front of Eckhart, neither of them offered to shake hands.

"We represent the Immortals," Dickat began.

"Thank you for coming…and thank you for your help against the Regiment. If we all work together, we can make sure the Regiment never bothers anyone on the fringes again."

Rory studied him, and Eckhart could just hear the questions firing in the old man's brain. He was wondering why an Earthling would be helping purge the Regiment from the fringes, but he didn't say it aloud.

Another ship drifted across the hatch, but it didn't come inside. It projected a Datrium beam into the *Atera*'s hold, and an image flashed into Eckhart's mind. Long white hair draped its bony skull,

skeletal face, and smoldering white eyes.

Eckhart.

Chyke.

I am representing Silent Death. I will attend your council through our connection. You will not see or hear me, but I will listen, and I will communicate your wishes and questions to Silent Death.

Will you be able to tell them when we need them to join the battle?

I will tell them everything you wish me to tell them. I will see and hear everything as if I was in the same room. If you have any questions, suggestions, or orders, you can address them to me.

I guess I'll have to be satisfied with that. You can start by communicating my gratitude for their help.

I have communicated it, Eckhart.

Akkek jostled Eckhart's shoulder. "What's going on? Are you okay?"

Eckhart shook himself awake. "The Silent Death representative is here."

Everyone stared at him. "Who is it?" Namol asked.

"It's Chyke. He's listening to us, and he'll communicate our decisions to the gang."

"I don't like this," Vuldak muttered. "Why couldn't they send a real representative like the rest of us?"

"You're a fool, Vuldak," Akkek told him. "Chyke is as real as the rest of us, and Silent Death wouldn't want to send a real representative for exactly the reason we've just seen. They're worried about someone trying to assassinate their delegate or pull some other underhanded trick."

"We're all here. We can get started." Eckhart waved to the elevator. "Let's go upstairs to the conference room."

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16

Eckhart escorted all the criminal representatives into the conference room. Vuldak, Namol, Rory Vagill, and Dickat Norheall lined up on one side of the big table. Dallas, Alice, Rixby, Akkek, and Squids lined up with Eckhart on the other side.

“Well?” Rory asked. “What is it you want from us, Eckhart? We’re all already set to fight the Regiment. We don’t have to take orders from you to wipe them out of existence.”

“So your grand plan is to peck away at them wherever and whenever?” Eckhart asked. “Your plan is for every gang to go its own way, without regard to what everyone else is doing? Is that your strategy for defeating the Regiment?”

Rory pulled his head down between his shoulders and looked away. “What do you suggest as an alternative?” Namol asked.

“I suggest we join forces into one giant army under a single leader,” Eckhart replied. “That leader doesn’t have to be me, but I’ve already started this war with the biggest force on the fringes under my command. From where I’m standing, asking you to choose a leader from among you would end in a whole lot of infighting and very little progress against the Regiment.”

The representatives exchanged glances. Most of them glared at each other, and Eckhart saw his words playing out in living color. None of these criminal organizations liked or trusted each other. They would rather slit each other’s throats than be in the same room.

“The only way we’re going to get this done,” Eckhart went on, “is if we’re all on the same page. If we each go our own way, we’ll fall to slaughtering each other the very first time one of us attacks something that someone else wanted to attack. That’s exactly what the Regiment wants, and it would play right into their hands. They’re betting on it. They’ve been betting against us for centuries. Their whole existence depends on us fighting each other instead of joining forces.”

“So you set yourself up as this glorious leader?” Dickat demanded. “What qualifies you to lead us? You’re a petty mercenary.”

“Actually,” Eckhart countered, “I’m now the leader of an organization more powerful and better armed than all of yours put together. If you really want to fight over who’s going to be the leader, I can wipe out each and every one of you and then there’ll be no pesky gangs to stand in my way. Would you prefer that?”

A dangerous silence fell over the room while Eckhart let that sink in. None of these shitheads would dare to challenge Aistenz like this. They’d better learn who was in charge here, and they’d better learn it quick.

Eckhart took a step nearer to the table, and relished the spike in tension at his advance. “Here’s what’s going to happen. We’re moving against Guzion Station, and anyone who comes with us will need to coordinate with the rest of the fleet. Anyone who doesn’t come with us will have to withdraw so they don’t interfere with our operation. Each of you will tell me right now whether you’re coming with us, and if you say that you are, you’re agreeing to do so under my command. Vuldak?”

Eckhart fixed his gaze on Vuldak, waiting for an answer. Vuldak jumped a foot in the air and tried to take a step back, but all the other representatives turned around to stare at him, too.

Eckhart felt a surge of power. This was all his. None of these chumps would dare to turn him down. If they did, it would mean slinking off to some forgotten corner of the galaxy and wearing the brand of coward and traitor for the rest of eternity.

Vuldak squirmed for a minute, cast a few frightened glances at his companions, and spluttered before finally blurting out, “Of course, Eckhart. You know the Chosen are with you.”

“And are you willing to accept my command and follow all orders from my fleet?”

“I…um, of course, Eckhart. Whatever you say.”

Eckhart turned to Namol. “What about the Jackal Clan, Namol? Do you accept my authority?”

Namol answered without hesitation, and with no shuffling of feet or looking around. He dipped his chin once. “Absolutely, Eckhart. Whatever it takes to defeat the Regiment. We are behind you completely.”

“Excellent. What about the Immortals?”

Dickat glanced at Rory, but Rory held Eckhart’s gaze without even blinking. “I want it known here and now, Eckhart, that the Immortals will only hand over this authority for the duration of the

war. As soon as the Regiment is defeated and we claim the fringes for alien kind, the Immortals will go back to being independent and we will never answer to anyone. Is that clear?"

"Absolutely," Eckhart replied. "This alliance is only for the purpose of defeating the Regiment. Once we do that, all obligations between us will be dissolved completely."

"Then we agree. We will submit to your authority."

Chyke's voice entered Eckhart's head without him even trying. *Silent Death also agrees, Eckhart.*

Before Eckhart could say anything else, the door opened and Bing came in. He crossed between Eckhart's people and the delegates. Bing halted at Eckhart's side and whispered in his ear. "We have a situation…it's critical."

Eckhart glanced over at him, but at that moment, the door opened for the second time, and Clifton and DeWalt both walked in.

Dickat spun around with a deafening roar. "What are these Earthlings doing here? How dare you insult us like this, Eckhart? You are a traitor! You spew flowery words about fighting the Regiment when you are working for the Earthlings all along!"

Eckhart tried to answer, but before he got a chance, DeWalt shoved Bing out of the way and started talking fast in Eckhart's face. The other representatives all exploded in accusations, threats, and demands. Eckhart couldn't hear a thing over the noise.

He bent close to DeWalt's mouth and DeWalt started talking louder, but the more attention Eckhart paid to DeWalt, the more irate the representatives got. Bing and Clifton tried to explain to Eckhart what was going on at the same time. The conference disintegrated into a shouting match.

Eckhart straightened up, raised his hands, and bellowed over the tumult. "Be quiet, all of you! Be quiet!"

The representatives stopped talking, if only to glare at him for having the audacity to tell them to be quiet, but in the moment's silence that followed, a distant rumble of gunfire shook the *Atera*.

"I tried to tell you," DeWalt began again. "The Regiment—they're coming here right now. They followed me, and they're coming after all of you as we speak."

"DeWalt no longer has the ability to disintegrate," Bing explained, "but he still has an embedded command line that allows him to connect mentally to the Regiment signaling system. He can detect their movements even at a distance. The Regiment is

launching another counterattack—against all of us."

Eckhart glanced over at the representatives, and another boom rocked the *Atera*.

Everyone leapt for the exit at once, and everyone started talking very loud and fast all over again. "Land your people at Guzion!" Eckhart called to Dallas. "We'll tie up the Regiment here for as long as we can. Rixby, launch the ground assault on Guzion now. Dallas will be there as soon as possible, but we need to engage the Regiment on multiple fronts."

Send them all out to Guzion, Eckhart, Chyke suggested. *Silent Death will deal with the Regiment here.*

No, I have a better idea. Send Silent Death against Dimitrov Station.

Silent Death is at your command, Eckhart. We will do it.

Eckhart brought his attention back into the room. Dallas had stormed out, heading back to the landing platform. Namol was exchanging last-minute instructions with Dickat.

"Our people are under attack!" Rory exclaimed. "We must go out and engage the enemy."

"Signal your people to take direction from the *Atera*," Eckhart ordered. "Let's go."

Akkek slid in next to Eckhart. "Is this enough of an emergency for us to go out and do our thing yet?"

"No. You stay put."

"At least let us pilot your squadrons," she insisted. "We can do more than just stand around. We want to fight."

"We can't risk you getting shot. You're too important."

She scowled at him, but he couldn't wait any longer.

Eckhart stepped out onto the podium and read the state of battle in a heartbeat. Dallas' ship streaked away under cover from the remaining battlecruisers.

Eckhart's fleet engaged Regiment craft assembling from all over. The *Marathon* dropped into space to join the alien defenders, and the ship vanished into the ever-growing horde.

The Regiment brought out every vessel on the block to go against Eckhart's fleet. At least a hundred Colossuses and three times as many Banshees rocketed into view, but all of them still wouldn't be enough to stand up to the fleet's Triorium drive.

The Regiment charged Eckhart's line and spread its Colossuses to either side, trying to encircle the fleet. The Banshees stabbed through both lines, trying to reach the alien fighters in the rear.

The two armies met in a storm of gunfire. The *Atera* and her sister ships turned outward to stop the Regiment from circling, and in half a second, the fleet overpowered the Regiment's might.

"Scramble all squadrons!" Eckhart ordered.

"Consider us scrambled," Staton's voice came through the communications system.

"Squadron Seven engaging the Banshees," Clifton added. "Drive them back through the line, Squadron Leader Five."

"Jackal Clan—forward!" Eckhart ordered.

"That's what I was waiting to hear," Namol replied, and the Jackal Clan swarmed over the squadrons to steamroll the Banshees.

"What about us?" Vuldak asked.

"Bring your crew about and advance on the Regiment from the rear," Eckhart told him. "Break the line from behind. Immortals, you take the right flank. Chosen and Immortals, drive them together. We'll encircle them instead."

"We're there," Dickat replied.

The Jackal Clan pounced on the Banshees, and in no time, the center of the Regiment's circle became a confused soup of squadrons, battle craft, and fighters all gunning for each other.

Eckhart lost sight of what was happening inside that ring. He had his hands full confronting the Colossuses trying to hem in his fleet. The Colossuses couldn't move as fast as the *Atera* and its sister ships, and as soon as Eckhart tried to charge them, the *Atera* broke the line and plunged through on the other side. Vuldak and the Chosen met him there, and they rounded on the Colossuses that now found themselves trapped in a shooting gallery of alien attackers.

The Colossuses tried to wheel and defend themselves, but at the same moment, the Jackal Clan and the squadrons overpowered the Banshees inside the ring. They forced the Banshees to withdraw until all the Regiment ships converged in a shoal of targets too tightly packed to escape.

The Jackal Clan and the Immortals closed the dragnet. Exploding ships sparked inside the horde as the alien army laid into their old enemy with a vengeance. Banshees tried to escape and break through, only to meet their deaths facing so many guns.

Eckhart withdrew the *Atera* out of range. "Fall back, Squadrons Five and Seven. *Sitera*, fall back."

"What are you trying to do to us?" Bing cried. "You can't pull us

out now! We're missing out on all the fun."

"Let our allies get a taste of blood in the water," Eckhart ordered. "This is their day."

"It's our day, too," Bing complained, but he pulled back anyway.

"All Squadrons, return to your bases," Eckhart ordered. "Rixby, order the fleet to set course for Guzion."

"Course set. Fleet standing by."

Eckhart waited a second longer. The Jackal Clan, the Chosen, and the Immortals surrounded a bubbling mass of explosions at their center. Eckhart couldn't see any more Regiment ships inside it.

"Eckhart!" Rixby squeaked. "Reports are coming in from Dimitrov. Silent Death is assaulting the station."

Eckhart switched over to the feed she sent to his podium. The image showed Dimitrov Station, several solar systems away. At first, it looked normal, with the usual freight and passenger traffic coming and going through the sentry crossing.

Eckhart frowned when he noticed something strange moving around on the ground. It started as a shadow beyond the landing zone, and then a massive wave of black flooded the station.

It crawled across the landing zone, chewing up ships as it went. They crumbled under the onslaught. Invisible enemies dragged the ships to the ground and sucked them under.

The shadow touched the Datrium reserve, and it exploded in a tower of flame, but nothing stopped the relentless advance of that terrible force. It consumed the medical kiosk and the barracks before it surrounded the Quadraplex.

The Regiment personnel didn't notice anything, either, not until the Datrium reserve went up. They shot at the thing, but the oncoming wave swallowed all their shots. Banshees and battle craft launched for other parts of the station, but they couldn't do anything against such an enemy.

The personnel retreated to the Quadraplex and then onto its roof. They shot every weapon they had at the thing, but nothing would stop it.

The tide of black eventually folded around the Quadraplex and pulled it under, along with all the people on it and around it. The thing swallowed the whole station and then sank back into the ground. It left Dimitrov a lifeless rock, as though the station had never been there.

Are you satisfied, Eckhart? Chyke asked.

Very satisfied. Thank you, Silent Death. When you are finished, meet us at Guzion. We have a statement to make.

We will be there.

"Wow!" Akkek whispered. "And I thought we were bad."

"Are we really going to do that to the whole Regiment?" Rixby asked.

"It isn't what you'd call a decisive military victory, is it?" Eckhart turned back to the battle.

He was just about to call the Jackal Clan, the Chosen, and the Immortals to break off and go ahead to Guzion when five Colossuses and a bunch of Banshees broke through the line. They erupted from the mayhem, fired a few parting shots at the *Atera*, and took off into space.

"They're making for Guzion!" Rixby squeaked. "They'll raise the alarm!"

"Let them go," Eckhart ordered. "They can't make any difference now."

"But—"

"Get me a picture of the situation at Guzion."

Rixby pulled up a satellite feed of Guzion Station. This base looked normal, too, except that it was about fifty times the size of Dimitrov and Oiwei. Vast fleets of ships patrolled its skies while hundreds of freight craft floated in and out of the landing zone. Plasma cannons and laser posts defended Regiment storehouses covering the landscape.

In addition to the usual Colossus-class battleships and Banshee-class fighters, even bigger Stormbreakers stood guard at strategic points in the atmosphere. They didn't move. They didn't even have any maneuvering capability. They stayed in one place, but their weaponry exceeded anything else Eckhart had ever faced before.

Far in the distance, more ships drifted down to land in open plains beyond the station's weapons range. They landed by the hundreds and disgorged thousands of ground troops.

The army deployed at the four points of the compass and converged on the station in a mass alien horde. More ships descended to drop off more troops as the first arrivals stormed the station's perimeter.

The cannons and Stormbreakers pivoted their guns and unloaded on the army. Colossuses and Banshees took to the air to bombard the oncoming invaders, but nothing stopped the aliens'

vendetta.

A flash of sunlight reflecting on metal winked somewhere in the throng. Dallas was down there leading the charge.

"Hold them at the perimeter," Eckhart ordered.

"What do you mean?" Rixby squeaked.

"I mean hold them at the perimeter. Tell Dallas to advance to the perimeter and hold position there until I give the word to attack."

"But the army is already under bombardment from the station," she argued. "Do you just want them to stand there and take it?"

"Yes. Exactly. Let the Regiment see that we could attack, but that we aren't."

Eckhart's communications system cracked. "They're finished, Eckhart," Namol told him. "There are none left."

Eckhart brought his attention back to the battle in front of him. Namol was right. The burning plasma and debris scattered. None of the Regiment ships survived apart from those few that had escaped.

"Jackal Clan, Chosen, and Immortals, advance to Guzion," Eckhart ordered. "Take your positions over the station, but don't attack until I give the word. Squadron Leader Seven and Squadron Seven Alpha, come on board and report to the bridge."

"What?" Staton exclaimed. "Why can't we take part in the battle?"

"Just follow orders, Major," Eckhart replied. "I'll explain everything when you get here."

"It's obvious, isn't it?" Clifton added from his Velocity. "He doesn't want Earthlings taking part in the battle."

"Eckhart *is* an Earthling," Namol interjected. "What do you think will happen when the Regiment finds out an Earthling is commanding the alien rebellion?"

"What the Regiment thinks doesn't concern us," Eckhart interrupted. "You have your orders, Squadron Leader Seven and Squadron Seven Alpha. Come on board and report to the bridge."

"I really liked the old Eckhart better," Clifton grumbled. "He was a pushover for his friends."

Bing laughed, but he was the only one who did. Staton and Clifton both returned to the *Atera*.

"Are you ready to go, Eckhart?" Rixby asked. "The Jackal Clan, the Chosen, and the Immortals are all en route."

So is Silent Death, Eckhart.

“Let’s go.” Eckhart stepped off his podium. “I’ll be back in a little while. You have the bridge, Rixby.”

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17

Eckhart turned to the elevator to leave the *Atera*'s bridge. Akkek and the other Akeix stood right behind the podium, watching the whole battle unfold.

Behind them, standing against the wall, saying nothing and pretending to be invisible, stood DeWalt. His expression transformed to a mixture of pain and terror when Eckhart spotted him.

Eckhart went to the elevator. The Akeix and the rest of the bridge were all too engrossed in the battle to notice when Eckhart pulled DeWalt into the elevator with him.

Eckhart waited until the doors shut before he turned to DeWalt. "Thank you for trying to warn us about the attack. Are you still in contact with the Regiment?"

DeWalt nodded down at the floor. "It's been fading ever since Akkek brought me on board, but it's still there. I wish it wasn't, Eckhart. I'm sorry."

"You don't have to apologize. None of this is your fault. I just need to know if it's a two-way street. You can obviously see and hear what they're doing. Can they see and hear what you're doing?"

DeWalt shrugged. "Maybe, but the connection is getting so fuzzy now that I don't think they'll be able to anticipate us." He dared to glance up at Eckhart. "It doesn't really matter, though, does it? Your force is so huge that it doesn't matter if they know ahead of time what you plan to do. Besides, they already know you're going after Guzion Station."

Eckhart faced forward and sighed. "You're right."

"What do you want me to do, Eckhart?" DeWalt's voice choked. "I'll leave the ship if you want me to. I'll go somewhere else. I don't want to make life more difficult for you than I already have."

"You haven't, DeWalt, and I don't want you to leave the ship. Your place is here, and I really need your help right now."

"You do? How can I help? I'm powerless."

"Not quite." The elevator doors opened on the landing platform. Squadron Leader Seven and Squadron Seven Alpha were just coming in to land.

“What’s so important that you need us back here?” Staton asked. “What’s more important than stopping the Regiment?”

“Two Velocities won’t make a difference in stopping the Regiment.” Clifton turned to Eckhart. “Please tell me you aren’t going to ask us to sit around and do nothing like the Akeix.”

“Come with me, you three.” Eckhart led the three men back to the elevator, but when the doors closed, he pulled the emergency stop to halt the car.

Clifton laughed nervously. “Is this your new office, Eckhart?”

“Listen to me,” Eckhart told them. “I have a job for you—all three of you.”

Clifton, Staton, and DeWalt looked at each other. If they didn’t get the picture now, it only proved how little they knew about the fringes they were so enthusiastic to protect.

“All four of us are Earthlings,” Eckhart explained.

“Uh…yeah?” Staton replied.

“We’re going to contact Earth, and we’re going to offer them a chance to capitulate.”

“They won’t do it,” Clifton countered.

“I know they won’t, but they’ll realize there are Earthlings on the other side. Whatever ridiculous notions they have about the aliens being heathenish freaks who don’t speak English will go out the window. They’ll have to start taking us seriously.”

“They won’t capitulate,” Staton added. “They won’t even negotiate.”

“I don’t expect them to. I just want them to see four Earthling faces on the other side with no aliens around. I want to show them who they’re dealing with.”

Clifton, Staton, and DeWalt gazed back at Eckhart, and he suffered another pang when he felt his life change all over again. He wanted the leaders of Earth to see who they were dealing with because they were dealing with *him*—not Clifton or Staton or DeWalt.

He was the one. He was the only one launching this assault. He was the only one responsible for destroying every last trace of the Regiment on the fringes. That responsibility rested with him and no one else.

“Just tell us what you want us to do, Eckhart,” Staton replied. “You know we’ll do it.”

“I need you to tell me who to contact,” Eckhart told him. “You

know the Regiment command structure. Who should I be talking to?"

"Well, you could contact the United Collateral Assembly. They're supposed to be the ruling body for all Earth colonies, including those outside the system, but if you really want to talk to someone in charge, I would suggest someone on the Regiment General Staff—Admiral Matthew Ferris or Admiral Julian Keating. They'll be posted to the General Staff Post at Taetov Station on Europa."

"That's good enough for me." Eckhart released the emergency stop, rode up to the bridge, and led the three men into the conference room. "Rixby, get me Taetov Station on Europa—attention Admiral Matthew Ferris or Admiral Julian Keating."

She stared up at him, but he didn't wait around to explain himself. He barricaded himself in the conference room. Now he was in a room with three other Earthlings, with no aliens around. His life only kept getting stranger by the day.

"How do you want to do this?" Clifton murmured. "Do you want us to talk to him? Staton and I are Regiment—or ex-Regiment. He might take it better coming from us."

"No," Eckhart replied. "I'll do all the talking. Just stand there and look Earthling."

They exchanged another glance, and Staton snorted. "We can do that."

A chirp came from the communications system, and Eckhart moved in front of it. He should feel nervous about this, but he didn't. He felt again that his whole life had been leading up to this moment.

He took his place with Clifton on one side of him, Staton on the other, and DeWalt at the end of the line.

The picture came up on his display, and he found himself facing two grey-haired men, both broad-shouldered and stern. "What is the meaning of this?" Admiral Keating erupted. "How dare you—" He broke off when he suddenly realized he was looking at four normal Earthlings.

"Good morning to you, too, Admiral," Eckhart replied. "As you can see, our force is poised to raze Guzion Station to the ground the same way we razed Govax, Oiwei, and Dimitrov. We demand to negotiate terms for the Regiment's immediate withdrawal from the fringes and—"

"*You* demand!" Admiral Keating thundered. "Who are you to demand anything? The aliens on the fringes are lucky the Regiment is there to stop them slitting each other's throats."

"Whether we slit each other's throats is our business, Admiral," Eckhart replied. "We don't need the Regiment to stop us. We know you've been experimenting for decades to come up with a doomsday weapon to annihilate the fringe population, and we've had enough. You have a choice. You can withdraw the Regiment from alien space and retreat to your own system forever, or we can drive you there. It's up to you which one."

"Who the hell do you think you are?" Admiral Keating turned to Staton. "How dare you get involved with this nonsense, Major? I'm ordering you—"

"Martin Staton is no longer a member of the Regiment, Admiral," Eckhart interrupted. "He's seen firsthand the lengths you'll go to destroy billions of innocent people so you can keep control of the fringes. These other two men have seen the same thing, and Mr. DeWalt here has been intimately involved in your plot."

Eckhart watched the admiral's expression change when Keating realized who DeWalt was, and that DeWalt was now standing on the other side of the negotiating table.

"Now the only question, Admiral, is how badly you want to keep Guzion Station intact. We have an overwhelming ground force surrounding Guzion's perimeter, and an overwhelming air force in orbit over the station. Give the word and I'll pull them back."

Keating's eyes flickered from one Earthling face to another. "I don't know who the hell you are, but—"

"My name is Adam Eckhart, and whatever you have to say to the fringe aliens from now on, you can say to me. I speak for the fringes, and I'm telling you that we won't stop until every Earthling returns to your system to stay there. We won't accept any other outcome."

"YOU ARE AN EARTHLING!" Keating bellowed. "You're a traitor to your own people."

"I'm not an Earthling, Admiral. I belong to the fringes, and these are my people. Now give me your decision. I have a whole lot of very angry aliens out there who want something to shoot at."

Keating's expression darkened. "I don't negotiate with aliens. If you attack Guzion, the Regiment will destroy every last living one

of you, whether you're an Earthling or not."

Eckhart actually smiled. "I thought you might say that. Have a nice day, Admiral, and I'll see you on Europa." He cut the line.

"That could have gone better," Clifton murmured.

"It went perfectly." Eckhart walked out onto the bridge and climbed onto the podium.

The ground force hovered around Guzion's perimeter while the cannons and Stormbreakers hammered them with shots, but the ground force still didn't strike. They were a hell of a lot more disciplined than Eckhart dared to hope.

The gangs in orbit didn't strike, either. A tense pause hung over the impending disaster. The aliens seemed to be relishing holding such a powerful Regiment station at gunpoint.

Eckhart hesitated, and enjoyed the same thrilling sense of power. The whole war hinged on his word. He could stop this now, but once he started it, it would keep growing and building with no end in sight—not until the real end.

That end drew him nearer. It wanted him and he wanted it. Fate didn't allow any other option.

Clifton, DeWalt, and Staton flanked his podium, and they all watched with the bridge staff. This was their Rubicon, and once they crossed it, there was no going back.

No one moved. No one breathed. Rixby didn't prompt him to do anything. This was all on him, and he loved it.

He moved his hand over to his controls and gripped the *Atera*'s guns. He squeezed the firing mechanism and the first Triorium ejection pierced the atmosphere.

"Fire at will!"

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CAPTIVE

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1

Hundreds of spaceships plunged through the atmosphere, dodged plasma shots erupting from the planet's surface, and unleashed hellfire on the station below.

Thousands of armed aliens swarmed the perimeter of the United Collateral Regiment's Guzion Station. The giant pounders on the ground swiveled downward. They plastered the invaders with plasma explosions, but with so many battle craft descending through the atmosphere, the big guns had no choice but to turn upward again.

A mixed multitude of ragtag criminal freighters, fighter craft, and attack vessels zoomed over the station. One of the giant weapons detonated atop of its high pillar. Fourteen Velocity-class fighters from Aistenz Trotaer's vast fleet rocketed through the fireball, with dozens of Banshee-class Regiment attack vessels right on their tails.

Stormbreakers posted around the station whirled in all directions, shooting plasma blasts at every rebel ship. The Stormbreakers didn't move, but they could target with pinpoint accuracy.

Adam Eckhart steered the *Atera* through the mayhem. The battlecruiser dwarfed nearly every other ship on the field except the Stormbreakers, but it maneuvered better than any ship Eckhart ever piloted.

He hounded after the Banshees, and the exploding cannon's flames rippled past the bridge. "Bring the Banshees around!" he ordered. "Bring them back around and drive them into the *Sitera*!"

"Where are you, Eckhart?" Namol yelled from the leading Velocity.

"I'm right on your ass, pal," Eckhart replied. "Bring them around. The *Sitera* is waiting for you."

Namol didn't answer, but he complied with Eckhart's order instantly. The Jackal Clan Velocities veered in a wide loop through the mayhem playing out over the station. Namol led the rebel attack force back toward exploding Colossuses and blasting Volts.

The Banshees tried to break off. They saw their quarry leading

them back into the danger zone, and Eckhart took his chance to pounce. He gunned the *Atera* right up their tailpipes and unloaded a vicious assault to force the Banshees forward.

The Jackal Clan put on speed, and their weapons carved a clear path. They zoomed between the Stormbreakers. The Jackal Clan almost flew straight into the big ships' guns, but the Stormbreakers had too many other targets to hit. The Jackal Clan skated through with no problem.

The Banshees saw their only escape route between friendly fire and took the bait. Eckhart plunged forward at the *Atera*'s top speed. He hammered the Banshees and they sprinted for the Stormbreakers' cover.

The Stormbreakers turned their fire on the *Atera*. "Break off!" Rixby squealed from her station in front of Eckhart's command podium, but he didn't break off.

He gritted his teeth as the Stormbreakers laid into the *Atera* with a vengeance. Eckhart squinted between their shots as the Banshees raced for safety.

Namol's Velocities whizzed skyward, and the Banshees put on speed to hunt them down. Eckhart should alter his course. Flying into the Stormbreakers' assault would damage his ship and maybe even destroy it, but he had to stay where he was. He had to give the Jackal Clan the chance to get away.

At the moment when the Stormbreakers' barrage reached its deadliest pitch, another battlecruiser vaulted upward from the surface. It lifted out of the chaos and swooped directly into the Banshees' path.

The Banshees flew straight into it, and the *Sitera* opened fire. The Stormbreakers were so occupied with the *Atera* that they couldn't change their tactics fast enough.

The *Sitera* unleashed a devaStatong bombardment, and two-thirds of the Banshees exploded. The rest scattered and left the Jackal Clan free to dive back into the battle.

The *Sitera* turned its wrath on the remaining five Banshees. They scrambled to get out of the way, but the *Sitera* destroyed three more before the last two escaped.

Eckhart kept up a constant barrage against the Stormbreakers, but as soon as the big ships realized the trick, they rotated away to attack the *Sitera* instead. This gave Eckhart the chance he needed, and he fired another torrent of Triorium ejections.

One of the two Stormbreakers detonated in a catastrophic *boom*, and the shockwave pelted the *Atera* and the *Sitera* out of range. Clouds of ships of every description surrounded the *Atera*, and Eckhart lost sight of the scene he'd just witnessed.

"The ground troops are overrunning the cannon towers," Rixby reported. "Our people are taking control of the guns."

Eckhart made one fleeting check on the cannon towers. Thousands of bodies clambered up the towers, and he spotted a flash of silver in the horde. The cannon rotated toward the *Atera,* and Eckhart saw Dallas Eldridge manning the gun. The sun glinted on his heavy Crionium armor.

He swung the big gun around, but when it went off and spat a lethal plasma surge into the atmosphere, the shot whistled past the *Atera*. The Datrium jet struck the remaining Stormbreaker and the big attack ship *woofed* in flame.

"Four more Stormbreakers under direct assault by the Chosen," Rixby announced.

Eckhart checked the rest of the battle. The combined rebel army worked together to drown Guzion Station in thousands of mismatched ships and a jumble of murderous aliens.

The Regiment launched hundreds of ships, but the joint criminal invasion force downed them all or destroyed them in the atmosphere. Eckhart had trouble seeing the surface with so many explosions going off and so many ground troops carpeting the tarmac.

"Silent Death is surrounding the station," Rixby told Eckhart. "They aren't invading."

Give the word, Eckhart, a silent voice whispered in Eckhart's head. *Do you wish us to invade the station?*

Not yet, Chyke, Eckhart replied. *Stand by.*

We are standing by.

Eckhart brought his attention back to the battle. Several civilian transport craft launched into the mayhem, and twenty Chosen fighter craft dropped in to run them down.

"Do you want to stop them?" Rixby asked. "They aren't even putting up a fight."

Eckhart hesitated, but before he could say anything, the Chosen surrounded the transports and opened fire. Eckhart still didn't say anything. He could have saved those people. He could order the Chosen to break off, but he didn't.

He watched the Chosen pick off one transport after another, and still Eckhart didn't say anything. Conflicting emotions roiled in his heart, watching those transports burst into flame and flare out to nothing.

Those transports carried Earthlings like himself. They were families and civilians with no say over what the Regiment did. No one on those transports took part in the Regiment's plot to slaughter billions of fringe aliens. None of them stole the fringe's resources to enrich Earth.

Even knowing those people were innocent couldn't make him speak to stop their deaths. This was all-out war between the fringe aliens and the Regiment. Ultimately, it was all-out war between the aliens and Earth. That made Earthlings the enemy.

The Regiment General Staff knew now that an Earthling was in charge of this rebellion. If those people made it back to Earth and told everyone that Eckhart had spared them, the Regiment would get the wrong idea.

The Regiment would suspect that Eckhart had spared them out of some misguided guilt about killing Earthlings. He couldn't let that happen. He had a job to do. He had to command this alien army to flex the fringes' power. He attacked Guzion to send a message.

The fringes wouldn't stop until they drove the Regiment out of alien space. That included all the Regiment's families and auxiliary staff. Any Earthling presence on the fringes was too much, no matter how innocent it might be.

If Eckhart wasn't here, some alien would stand by and let the Chosen kill those people. The result would be the same. That was the message the Regiment needed to receive. Who commanded the rebellion didn't matter.

Rixby interrupted his thoughts. "Dallas is contacting you, Eckhart. The Stormbreakers have been destroyed and the Immortals are driving the rest of the Colossuses into a fire trap. Dallas is taking the ground troops off the cannon towers. He wants to know if you want him to post gunners just in case."

"Yes, post them. Order the *Eotera*, the *Sitera*, and the *Kestera* down to the landing zone. Tell Dallas to meet me there."

Eckhart scanned the station on his way to the ground. The different factions of the fringe army worked together to destroy the last Colossuses. No Banshees remained, and clouds of debris drifted

in the atmosphere where the Stormbreakers used to be.

Pillars of fire and ash billowed from the station where the ground troops had blown up Datrium storage cisterns, armories, and storehouses. Half the structures on Guzion Station had been destroyed, but the rest were all intact.

"How many Earthlings are still on the station?" he asked Rixby.

"The command staff is in the control room. About four hundred pilots are on standby in the barracks near the landing zone, but there aren't any ships left for them to fly. What do you want to do about the pilots?"

Eckhart hesitated again. Was he really going to authorize the wholesale slaughter of hundreds of unarmed people? Did taking Aistenz's place really turn him into this monster?

"Tell Dallas to transfer the command staff to the barracks and put everyone under guard."

"What will that accomplish?" Blake Clifton asked from behind Eckhart's podium. "You can't leave pockets of Regiment staff under guard across the galaxy. Leaving them alive will only give them a chance to fight back."

Eckhart raised his eyebrow at his friend. "Are you encouraging me to kill them all? I'm surprised at you."

Clifton shrugged and looked away. 'I'm just saying it's inconsistent with your mission."

"We'll blow every ship on the planet. They won't be able to leave, and then we won't have to guard them. Besides, every alien on the fringes will be looking out for renegade Regiment Earthlings. The Regiment staff will be much safer if they stay here." Eckhart stepped off his podium. "Put us down with the others, Rixby. I'll be right back."

"Are you going to talk to the command staff?" Coleman DeWalt asked. "Do you want me and Clifton to come with you?"

"Not yet. Stay here. I'll handle this."

"They might be more considerate if they see you with more Earthlings," Clifton pointed out.

"That's exactly why I want them to see me with aliens. I want them to understand they aren't facing an Earthling crew."

Eckhart walked off the bridge and passed Squids on his way to the elevator. Squids had been unusually retiring since Eckhart had taken Aistenz's mantle. Maybe Squids didn't know how to act now that his long-time boss was dead.

Then again, so many crazy things had been happening since then, Eckhart hadn't had a chance to discuss Squids' position with his new majordomo.

Eckhart made a mental note to touch base with Squids as soon as the *Atera* left Guzion. Every leader needed his righthand man, and Eckhart couldn't ask for a better lieutenant than Squids.

He stepped into the elevator, and to his surprise, four huge Iawei accompanied him. Eckhart didn't notice them on the bridge while the battle was going on. Their hulking forms made him feel puny, and all four carried massive pounders bigger than Eckhart's chest.

"What are you boys doing?" Eckhart asked. "I don't remember assigning any new people to the bridge."

"Squids assigned us," the biggest Iawei boomed. "He assigned us to be your bodyguard."

Eckhart burst out laughing. The idea of him having a bodyguard shouldn't seem so ridiculous, especially after one of the fringe criminal syndicates had already tried to assassinate him.

The Iawei didn't seem to think it was funny, though. They faced front, and when the elevator opened on the landing platform, the four Iawei flanked him on all sides.

They followed him down to the ground. The three remaining battlecruisers of Aistenz's fleet formed a glistening line in the sun.

More alien ships descended to land around the *Atera*. Eckhart's throat tightened when the *Marathon* zoomed overhead, rotated once, and lowered onto its landing gear.

Smoke billowed from one engine housing, and part of the *Marathon*'s hull had been scorched by plasma burns. The hatch opened and two people came out: a Bion wearing a gas mask over her face, and a tall, thin, lanky alien who looked both young and old at the same time.

Eckhart bit back a grin and nodded toward the ship. "What happened to you? Are you losing your touch?"

"You wish, Eckhart," Alice snarled through her mask. "We'll need a fresh load of Celdian after that battle."

"Get in touch with Squids and help yourself. In fact…." Eckhart waved at the other alien craft assembling all over the station. "We can probably help ourselves to the Regiment supplies while we're here. You can take charge, Alice. Make sure all these ships get refueled and rearmed for the next assault."

Alice stared at him with her black, sightless eye sockets. “Me! You want *me* to do it?”

“Why not? Are you doing something else?”

“The *Marathon*…”

“Yes?” Eckhart prompted. “What about it?”

“It’s…small. The *Marathon* isn’t big enough to command all these ships. The fringe aliens would never stand for it.”

“I’m not talking about the *Marathon*. I’m talking about you. I need people commanding this army for me. I need people I can trust. Rixby is on the *Atera* and Dallas is handling the ground troops. You take over the air force, Alice.” She gaped at him for a minute and then turned away. “You can handle that, can’t you?”

She didn’t answer, but Innyria laughed. He clapped Alice on the back, which was a hell of a lot more intimate a gesture than Eckhart ever would have dared to make. “I told you you’d take over this operation one day. So whose ass are you gonna kick first—besides mine?”

“Who are *they*?” Eckhart jutted his chin at four aliens hanging around the *Marathon*’s hatch.

They were all Sataad, a scaly, semi-reptilian race with large, glassy black eyes and no visible mouths. They wore no clothes except that each one wore a sidearm. Those guns reminded Eckhart curiously of the weapons he’d left behind on the *Marathon*.

“They’re our new crew,” Innyria replied. “When we left the *Atera*, Alice took me back to Parilia like you told her to. When we got there, the whole place was buzzing with the news that you were going after the Regiment. The Chosen and the Immortals were all mobilizing every ship and fighter they could muster. These four wanted to go, but they weren’t attached to any gang, so they were grounded. They overheard us talking about coming back to rendezvous with you, and they asked if they could sign on.”

“How have they been shaping up since then?” Eckhart asked.

“They’re a massive pain in the ass,” Alice growled. “None of them knows how to fly.”

“But that doesn’t matter, because *you* know how to fly, don’t you?” Innyria countered. “Alia is brilliant with the records—almost as good as Rixby—and Chara is one hell of a shot. She never misses.”

Eckhart studied the four Sataad. “Are they all female?”

“Kogor is the only male.”

“They’re useless,” Alice grumbled. “Taking them on was a big mistake.”

Innyria only smiled at her. “They’ll learn. We all had to start somewhere.”

Eckhart couldn’t stop looking back and forth between Innyria and Alice. They were sure getting along well, considering how much Alice had bad-mouthed Innyria when he first joined the *Marathon* crew.

Eckhart had never seen anyone—not anyone—treat Alice with such obvious affection. Innyria acted positively warm toward her. Eckhart and his crew never dared to do that. Alice always acted so prickly toward all of them, even toward Eckhart, whom she considered her closest friend.

Just then, Dallas trooped over. “The station is secure, Eckhart—all except the command staff. The ground troops are stationed around the pilot’s barracks. None of those fools is going anywhere, but we thought you’d want to deal with the command staff yourself. None of the aliens want to go inside.”

“I’m coming. You have your orders, Alice. Get these ships resupplied. If you have any problems, check in with Rixby on the *Atera*.” Eckhart turned away to join Dallas. “Are the command staff armed?”

“They have a few security guards posted inside with sidearms. The control room was protected by cannon towers, so the command staff might have thought they didn’t need weapons.”

“So no one’s even tried to communicate with the command staff?”

Dallas chuckled. “No one will admit it, but I think these fierce aliens are as afraid of Earthlings as the Earthlings are of them.”

“I guess that puts me in charge.” Eckhart halted outside the command control room. “How do you feel about coming inside with me? Are you afraid of a few Regiment officers carrying sidearms?”

“I’m not afraid. I’ll come if you want me to.”

“I’d better face them alone first just so no one gets any trigger-happy ideas. Do me a favor, though, will you?”

“Anything, Eckhart. Just name it.”

“Stand out here and scan the control room while I’m inside. If you see anyone getting twitchy or moving their hand toward their weapon, come inside and diffuse the tension.”

Dallas laughed much louder. “I’m quite sure my presence will

increase the tension rather than diffuse it."

"You're probably right." Eckhart patted Dallas' enormous shoulder. "Wish me luck."

"Good luck, Eckhart. You're going to need it."

Eckhart opened the door and stepped into the control room. About thirty men waited for him inside, all of them holding up their hands in an attitude of surrender.

They stared at Eckhart with huge eyes, and they all looked petrified. No one moved. None of these people posed a threat to him. They really were just as afraid of the fringe aliens as the aliens were of them. The situation couldn't be more comic.

Eckhart took a deep breath. "You can all put your sidearms here on this workstation, and then you can put your hands down. We aren't here to kill you."

The officers exchanged glances and slowly started to lower their arms. They came forward one after another and deposited their guns under Eckhart's eye before they returned to their places. Some raised their hands again, checked themselves, and lowered them.

Once they'd all disarmed, Eckhart drew in another steadying breath. "Now here's what's going to happen. We're going to move you all over to the pilots' barracks. A bunch of your boys are waiting over there and they're under alien guard. Once we secure Guzion, we'll destroy every ship on the planet, and then we'll leave you alone. You'll be left to your own devices for the duration of the war, but you won't be able to leave Guzion. Is that understood?"

"You mean," one captain ventured. "You aren't going to kill us?"

"I wasn't planning to. If you don't provoke the aliens, you should all survive the war and make it back to Earth and your families when this is all over."

The officers frowned and looked at each other. "But…you're an Earthling," one of them pointed out.

"Is that relevant?" Eckhart asked. "I'm on the alien side. That's all you need to know. Now I want your assurance that you'll all cooperate and not try anything once you get outside."

"Why would we try anything?" someone else asked. "None of us wants to die."

"Just do as I ask and cross to the pilots' barracks. Don't do anything that the aliens might see as a threat. Understand?"

The officers nodded. "All right," Eckhart began. "Let's all line up here by the—"

A high-pitched whine caught his ear and he cocked his head to listen.

The officers all looked around, too. Some checked the nearby workstations, trying to locate the source of the noise. “What is that?” Eckhart asked.

“I’m not sure.” A lieutenant fiddled with the controls. “I can’t locate it and I can’t turn it off.”

Eckhart went to the man’s side and saw at a glance that the lieutenant was telling the truth. The station’s instruments gave an accurate assessment of the situation outside. Nothing showed up that might cause the noise.

“Wait here,” Eckhart told the man. “I have a friend outside who can—”

He started toward the door to call Dallas inside. He made it four steps when the whine spiked to a shriek, and the next instant, the control room exploded in an unholy ball of fire.

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2

Alice ducked when a ground-shaking boom rocked Guzion Station. She froze when she saw the control room in flames and Dallas crouched at the edge of the fire.

Alice charged into a full run. She would have run straight into the blast, but Dallas launched to his feet and grabbed her. He muscled her away with his overpowering strength. “No! You can’t go in there!”

“Eckhart!” Alice thundered “Eckhart!”

“There’s nothing you can do!” Dallas hauled her another twenty feet back before he slackened his grip. “It’s over.”

Alice shook him off, but he blocked her path with his huge armored bulk. “What the hell happened? You were supposed to be guarding him.”

“I wasn’t supposed to be doing anything,” Dallas snapped. “He’s the one who’s supposed to be in charge of the rest of us.”

“So you let him walk right into a trap? You’re supposed to be his friend, Dallas!”

“I scanned the building the whole time he was inside. He disarmed the whole command staff. He was never in any danger.”

“Then how do you explain *this*?!” she bellowed. She waved at the fireball that didn’t diminish with the passing seconds.

Dallas turned around and inclined his head to one side. He was scanning the fire even now. “There was no sign. I can’t explain what happened.”

“That isn’t good enough!” Alice barked. “What are we supposed to do now?”

Dallas sighed. “He was my friend, too, but there’s nothing we can do. Get back to the *Marathon*. We have to—”

“To hell with the *Marathon*!” she roared. “Screw the *Marathon*! I don’t want the damn *Marathon*! I want Eckhart, Dallas!”

Dallas waved her away. “Come over to the *Atera* with me, then. We need to see Rixby and Bing right away…and Squids.”

He stepped around her to where Innyria waited for them. Innyria turned to accompany Dallas back to the *Atera*, but Alice didn’t move.

Her sightless eyes picked up chemical fluctuations in the fire. Datrium, Triorium, and a few other explosives combined into a searing inferno that might burn for hours. It blistered Alice's cheeks, but she didn't leave.

She struggled to stop herself from rushing into the flames to search for Eckhart. She couldn't bring herself to accept that he was dead, not after all the years they'd spent together on the *Marathon*.

He'd saved her life and she'd saved his, too many times to count. Even after he gave her the *Marathon* so she could be free, she never fully believed that she would ever be very far away from him. He couldn't be gone. This world couldn't exist without Eckhart in it somewhere.

She drifted into a daze watching the chemicals swirl before her eyes. They calmed her enough to make her notice something strange. "Dallas!"

"What?"

"Look."

"This is pointless. Let's—"

She spun around, grabbed his arm, and dragged him back to where they both stood a moment before. "Look, Dallas." She turned him so his helmet faced the fire. He inclined his head one way and then the other. "Do you see that?"

"It makes no sense," he muttered. "It's impossible. Maybe the fire was too hot. Maybe…"

Innyria came up behind them. "What's going on?"

Alice whirled away. "Eckhart is alive. Come on, Dallas."

Dallas fell in at her side. They both set off at a rapid clip toward the *Atera*. "How can you be sure he's alive?" Innyria asked. "No one could survive that fire."

"There were no bodies in the flames," Dallas replied. "Burning bodies give off a very distinct set of chemical indicators. It's unmistakable, and my scanners have been programmed to detect them even at solar temperatures."

"Charming," Innyria muttered. "Really heartwarming, man."

"The blast came from underneath the control room," Alice went on. "That's why Dallas didn't detect it priming to blow while Eckhart was inside. The charges were hidden underground."

"Are you saying the Regiment mined its own control room?" Innyria asked. "Why would they do that?"

"To stop anyone from taking control of the station, of course,"

Dallas replied.

"But they would have killed their whole staff," Innyria pointed out.

Just then, Clifton and DeWalt came running over. "What…what happened?" Clifton panted.

"Go back to the *Atera* and find Squids," Dallas ordered. "Tell him to bring Rixby, Bing, and Akkek to the bridge conference room on the double. We have a situation."

"I'll say we do," DeWalt's voice cracked. "Eckhart is dead. This is a disaster."

"He isn't dead," Alice snapped. "He's been captured by the Regiment."

Clifton and DeWalt both stopped dead in their tracks while Dallas, Alice, and Innyria kept walking. Alice didn't turn around a second time.

Someone stole Eckhart, and for that, they deserved to die. No one messed with Alice's friends and got away with it. Eckhart was always too kind and soft to be much of a criminal overlord, but that didn't mean anything.

Clifton and DeWalt recovered by the time Alice, Dallas, and Innyria entered the *Atera*. The four young Sataads from the *Marathon* and four enormous Iawei that Alice didn't recognize met them there.

"Who the hell are you?" Alice asked the Iawei.

"We're Eckhart's bodyguards. He told us to let him question the command staff alone. We're responsible for this disaster. Squids will turn us over to the disciplinary staff for punishment."

"You aren't responsible for anything and no one is going to be punished for anything," Dallas replied. "Eckhart isn't dead, and if you're responsible for his safety, you can help us get him back."

Alice led the way to the elevator. She didn't see how the Iawei could get inside it with the rest of the *Marathon* crew, but before she got there, the doors opened.

Squids burst out wringing his hands. "What are we going to do? This is terrible! We just lost Aistenz and now this! We need to appoint another leader immediately. Alice—"

"Eckhart isn't dead," she interrupted. "He's been captured by the Regiment and we're going after him, so we'll need all the resources you can give us."

Squids froze. "Are you sure? The fire…"

“We’re sure,” Dallas replied. “Come upstairs, Squids. We need your help…and bring Bing up there, too. We need to tell him what’s happened.”

Dallas stepped into the elevator with Alice and Innyria. The three of them took up all the space, and they rode up to the bridge.

“Where do you think they took him?” Innyria asked on their way up.

“Another Regiment station, of course,” Alice snarled.

“Or Earth,” Dallas suggested. “They’ll want to make a spectacle out of a prisoner as valuable as Eckhart.”

The doors opened and Dallas and Alice both stopped on the bridge. The whole bridge staff turned in their seats to stare at Rixby, who crouched on top of her workstation as usual, but she didn’t work her controls.

She had withdrawn her antennae underneath her fur and she rocked back and forth on the workstation. Sobbing sounds came from under her shaggy outer coat.

That sound did something to Alice. It cooled her anger and woke a deep well of pain she never let herself feel before. She actually believed for a few minutes that Eckhart was dead.

She realized a moment later that she was wrong, and she was grateful that she did. She didn’t know what she would have done or what she would have become if she actually had to face that.

No one moved on the bridge. The whole bridge staff stared at Rixby rocking and crying over Eckhart.

Alice had to fix this. She climbed down to Rixby’s workstation and lifted the little alien off the controls. Rixby’s body shuddered in Alice’s arms as Alice carried her back upstairs.

The elevator opened a second time and Clifton and DeWalt came out with the four Sataad.

The friends went into the conference room and Alice set Rixby on the table. Rixby kept crying as hard as ever, and Alice didn’t try to stop her. Alice didn’t blame Rixby for her outburst, and Rixby would realize the truth in a minute.

The doors opened again, and the four Iawei came in with Bing. He blinked at everyone and his gaze finally rested on Alice. “Is it true?”

“Eckhart is still alive,” Dallas replied. “The Regiment captured him.”

“Are you sure? They’re saying downstairs that he was burned

alive in that fire."

"We're sure," Alice growled. "Now we have to figure out how to get him back."

"We don't even know where they took him," Innyria remarked.

"We'll find out." Dallas broke off when the door opened yet again. Akkek Stratha and a bunch of Akeix entered with Squids.

"Are you absolutely certain Eckhart isn't dead?" Squids croaked. "I don't think I can handle another succession so soon."

"He's alive," Akkek insisted. "We just scanned the blast site. There aren't any bodies or even any residue from Earthling bones or flesh."

Rixby stopped crying and one of her antennae extended from under her fur. "He is?"

"Yes, Rixby," Alice replied. "Eckhart is alive and we're going to get him back. We need you to use your magic and find out where they took him."

"But…" Her other antenna appeared. "How can I do that when there's no trace of how they got him off the planet?"

"We have faith in you," Alice replied.

"You're all we've got," Bing added.

Squids shuffled his feet. "I just don't know about this."

"That doesn't matter," Alice told him. "We need you and Rixby to continue running the fleet as Eckhart's proxies. You two can ensure continuity of command until we bring Eckhart back."

"We want to help," one of the big Iawei rumbled. "We're responsible for Eckhart's safety."

Alice wandered over to them. "What are your names?"

"I am Ephus. This is Suna, Mutov, and Autov."

"All right. Consider yourselves assigned to the *Marathon* for the duration of this operation."

"I can help, too," Alia chirped from over by the door. The other Sataads nodded their agreement.

"We need you four on the *Marathon*, too." Alice turned to Dallas. "You should stay here. Eckhart would want one of his own people in charge of the army while he's away."

"Forget it. I'm coming with you. You aren't going against the Regiment without me."

Alice let out a heavy breath through her mask. "I was afraid you might say that."

"We're coming, too," Akkek added. "You're going to need us."

“Fine. Arm the whole fleet, Squids. Resupply every ship with Datrium, and while you’re at it, resupply and repair the *Marathon* ready to fly right away.”

“But…I can’t command the fleet. I’ve never done it before.”

“Then we’ll put Rixby in charge. You can handle things for Eckhart until we bring him back, can’t you, Rixby? You move over to the command podium. That’s where you belong anyway.”

“But I can’t fly.”

“Then assign yourself a pilot. I’m sure this fleet has plenty of them. All of you get over to the *Marathon*. How long before you can repair the engines and the hull breach, Squids?”

Squids started to answer, but at that moment, the door opened and a whole new raft of people charged in.

“What is the meaning of this outrage!?” Rory Vagill bellowed. “Which one of these traitorous backstabbers killed Eckhart in cold blood?”

Namol bared his teeth and snarled like an animal. “You keep your accusations to yourself. You were the one who claimed you would withdraw your loyalty to Eckhart the moment the battle ended. For all we know, *you* killed Eckhart to undermine our cause.”

Vagill rounded on him spitting tacks. “How dare you? I pledged my fortune to free the fringe aliens from Regiment oppression. Do you really believe I would kill Eckhart and undercut our whole campaign? For what?”

“Gentlemen, please—” Squids stepped forward, but Vagill knocked him out of the way, squaring up to Namol.

Vuldak Dhaddet, the Chosen representative, also tried to intervene by getting between Namol and Rory. “Squabbling like this won’t bring Eckhart back. We have to choose a new leader right away.”

“No one is choosing *you* as a leader, Vuldak.” Namol whirled back to Rory. “You will never lead this rebellion, Vagill—never. No one trusts you.”

“Find me someone who trusts a blood-sucking assassin like you,” Rory snarled. “You don’t give a damn about the fringes. You only care about yourself and your profits.”

Namol took a step nearer and bumped his chest against Rory’s. “Say that again. Say again that I don’t care about the fringes.”

“Stop!” Alice roared. “Eckhart is still alive. All of you pledged

your loyalty and your help to defeat the Regiment. Your pledge is still binding as long as Eckhart is alive."

"He may be alive, but he is no longer in charge of this operation," Vagill countered. "The Immortals will never fight under any leader who doesn't earn the right in open combat."

"Bring it on," Namol hissed. "I'll taste your blood before the sun goes down."

"Stop!" Rixby's voice squeaked over the argument. "Eckhart left a successor in charge of the rebellion until he returned to take command. He placed someone in charge to handle the mission in his place."

Namol tore his furious eyes away from Rory and glanced at her. "Who is it? Who did he leave in charge?"

"Yeah, Rixby," Dallas asked. "Who did Eckhart leave in charge?"

Rixby looked around at them all and her familiar chirped out for everyone to hear. "Me."

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3

Vuldak Dhaddet gasped and his mouth fell open staring at Rixby. "You! *You're* Eckhart's successor?"

"That's impossible," Dickat Norheall spluttered. "You're…."

"Eckhart's last words before he left were for me to handle everything until he came back. You can confirm it with the bridge staff and the ship's records if you don't believe me. That order was a clear expression of intent to pass his authority to his designated successor. Am I right, Squids?"

Squids squirmed and then nodded. "Yes. That's right."

"Ephus!" Rixby squeaked. "I'm reassigning you to guard the new commander of Aistenz Trotaer's fleet. If any of these upstart gangs threaten me or disobey my orders, you have my direct mandate to break them in half."

Ephus and the other Iawei stepped forward to surround Rixby. "Yes, Ma'am," Ephus rumbled.

The gang leaders blinked at the Iawei standing over them, and then they looked at Rixby. She hadn't moved from her place on the table. She looked so small and insignificant, but if she could command Aistenz's empire in Eckhart's place, no one would dare to stand up to her.

Vuldak actually took a step backward to get away from the Iawei. Rory Vagill and his deputy Dickat Norheall changed their expressions instantly. Namol burst into a grin of pure triumph. "Are you certain he's alive?" he asked.

"We're certain," Alice replied.

At that moment, Chyke's voice entered Alice's head. *Eckhart is alive.*

Do you know where he is? Alice asked.

He is somewhere in the Atruna system, but I cannot locate him more precisely than that. The Regiment is using some force to mask Eckhart's position, but I am certain he is alive there.

Alice turned to Rixby. "Did you…?"

"I heard him. We'll take the fleet—"

"No," Alice interrupted. "The fleet and the five gangs need to go on with the mission to bring down the Regiment. The *Marathon* will

find Eckhart and bring him back."

"Wouldn't it work better if the whole fleet goes after him?" Bing asked. "One ship against the whole Regiment…"

"We'll play this according to Eckhart's rules," Alice replied. "He'd want the fleet to occupy the Regiment on many fronts while a small, targeted team carries out a surgical strike to retrieve the prisoner. He's done it many times before."

Bing frowned. "He never said that."

"He didn't say it because he didn't know it was called that," Dallas replied. "He's totally self-taught. He might not know what a surgical strike is called, but he's famous for them."

Rixby hopped off the table. "Namol, Rory, and Vuldak, you all get back to your people and get your crews in the air. We're moving on."

"Where are we going?" Namol asked. "What's our next target?"

"We're going after Bunkagua Station, next and we need all of you working together." Rixby stopped in front of Vuldak and Rory. "Unless you really want to get into a death match right now—but don't think you're going to take over. If you don't come with us and cooperate with all orders from the *Atera*, your pledge will be broken and your credibility on the fringes will be destroyed along with it. Is that what you want?"

Neither of the two men answered. Namol grinned even more delightedly. Everyone else stared at Rixby talking down to these much larger, more powerful, and more deadly criminal overlords.

Alice experienced an inexplicable thrill watching Rixby take over Aistenz Trotaer's fleet. Alice could almost believe that Eckhart had known what he was doing when he left Rixby in charge.

Rixby waddled over to the door. She halted in front of Dallas and she had to stretch her antennae all the way backward to look up at him. "You'll need to assign another general to the ground troops if you plan to leave, Dallas."

"General Borzi was in charge before Eckhart assigned me to the ground force. Borzi can take over."

"Good." Rixby looked around at everyone. "Alice…"

A blip on the control panel cut her off. It came from the other end of the table where Rixby had just been standing.

She clambered over to it, but before she could do anything, the display behind her flickered on. Alice snarled at the image of two Earthling men standing side by side.

They looked out at the scene in the conference room and both men's countenances twisted in disgust. "Where are the two Earthlings that threatened us yesterday?"

Alice, Rixby, and Dallas exchanged glances. "What are they talking about?"

Clifton and DeWalt pushed forward. "I think he means us. We were with Eckhart when he contacted the Regiment General Staff." Clifton positioned himself in front of the display. "I'm retired Major Blake Clifton, and I believe you already know Mr. Coleman DeWalt. You're Admirals Matthew Ferris and Julian Keating, aren't you?"

Admiral Keating adjusted his neck inside his collar now that he was facing a former Regiment officer. "I don't know who the hell you think you are, buddy, but no Regiment officer would have anything to do with this outrage."

Clifton pursed his lips. "Is there some reason you're wasting our afternoon, Admiral? You heard Eckhart…"

"I heard him." The admiral's lips parted in a wolfish grin. "I heard plenty from Eckhart, Mister, and now you're going to hear from me."

The two admirals stepped apart to reveal Eckhart himself standing right behind them. He leaned against a wall with his arms and wrists tied behind his back.

Swollen bruises made his face barely recognizable. Gashes split his eyebrows and cheeks where the puffy flesh had broken open. Blood oozing from his nose, one ear, and his many cuts.

"As you can see, Eckhart has had plenty to say to us," Admiral Keating sneered. "We never dreamed our rescue pod on Guzion would net us such a valuable prize. I suppose that only proves you aliens are too stupid to succeed. Give up now. Evacuate Guzion and go back to your holes on the fringes before someone gets hurt."

Fuming rage boiled in Alice's middle. She stepped forward and would have throttled the admiral right there if she only knew how to lay her hands on him. "If anything happens to him…"

"Plenty has already happened to him, and plenty more will continue to happen to him. What you see here is only the first taste. Every Regiment station that falls to this rebellion will earn Eckhart another visit to our specially trained interrogation team—not that we really need to get any information out of him. We already know what you aliens are up to. You've made it so obvious."

"You filthy, stinking—"

Rixby cut Alice off. “What do you want, Admiral? What do you want in exchange for Eckhart’s safe return?”

“Eckhart will never return to the fringes. He’ll stay in Regiment custody for the rest of his life. If you care about him at all and want him to stay alive, you’ll abandon this rebellion, lay down your weapons, and return to your home planets. If you move against any other Regiment position or if we see any alien ship preparing to move against the Regiment again, Eckhart will die. That’s our offer. Take it or leave it.”

Alice couldn’t stop staring at Eckhart. He gazed at the display out of swollen, blackened eyes. The white of one eye had been bruised bright red, and bloody ooze seeped from it. It looked like he might be crying, but Alice knew better.

What was he trying to tell his friends across the lightyears? Was he desperate or scared? Alice couldn’t believe that. Did he want his friends to rescue him?

That wasn’t the Eckhart Alice knew. He wouldn’t want them sacrificing even one load of Datrium for him. He would want them to keep fighting. He would want the *Marathon* crew to let him die so they could defeat the Regiment once and for all. That was Eckhart’s way.

“I’ll give you one hour to vacate Guzion Station,” the admiral went on. “We’ve recorded the signatures of every ship that took part in the attack. If any of them comes near another Regiment station—ever—the truce is off and Eckhart is dead.”

The admiral cut the connection and the display went dark. Dallas sighed and turned away. “There you have it. Now we have proof that Eckhart is still alive. You don’t have to doubt anymore.”

“We can’t surrender,” Bing exclaimed. “We’ve come this far.”

“We *won’t* surrender,” Rixby countered. “Rory—Vuldak—Namol—get your ships off of Guzion and fall back to your own planets like the admiral said.”

“We can’t!” Namol countered. “We can’t just lie down and give up. If we do this, the Regiment will have won. Eckhart wouldn’t want that.”

“We aren’t giving up. We’re going to finish this, but we have to rescue Eckhart first. We don’t have time to rearm everyone before the time limit. Get off the station and fall back. I’ll contact you when it’s time to put the next phase into operation.”

Namol scowled, but he finally left the conference room with the

others. Rixby walked along the table and stopped next to Alice. “You need to get the *Marathon* off Guzion, too, Alice. The Regiment has marked the ship along with the rest of us.”

“That’s going to make it a lot harder to take the *Marathon* near any Regiment station,” Dallas pointed out.

“We still have façades,” Alice muttered. “We’ll find Eckhart. We just need to figure out where they took him.”

“Get in the air and head for the Atruna system. I’ll find out where that transmission came from, and I’ll contact you when I know anything.”

Alice tore herself away from the empty display. Eckhart wasn’t there anymore, but she couldn’t block him out of her mind. He looked bad. One more beating like that would probably kill him, and if it didn’t, the third one would.

The whole rebellion had come to a grinding halt because of one man. Eckhart was always the heart and soul of the *Marathon* crew and not because he owned the ship.

Now, in the space of a few days, he’d become the heart and soul of the whole fringe population. The rebellion stood or fell on him. No one could or would do anything without him.

None of that meant anything to Alice. She had to get Eckhart back. She was alive today because of him.

She’d repaid her debt to him many times, but she still refused to abandon him. She would go after him alone if she had to. She wouldn’t be able to do anything else until she found him and got him out of the Regiment’s clutches.

Bing went over to the door, and once he walked out, the rest of the crew followed. The four Sataads, the four Iaweis, Dallas, Clifton, DeWalt, Akkek, and the Akeix filed out of the conference room until only Alice and Rixby remained.

“We’ll get him back,” Alice growled under her breath.

“I know,” Rixby squeaked. “I’ll take care of things here. I’ll keep Eckhart’s fleet ready. If you need anything at all—distractions—attacks—anything…”

“I know,” Alice murmured. “Just…don’t let those assholes do anything to Eckhart’s empire.”

“No one will take it as long as I’m around. This empire needs a leader too much. It can’t function without one.”

Alice nodded. She knew all that, but she still felt something remained unsaid between her and Rixby.

“You better go,” Rixby chirped. “Eckhart needs you.”

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4

Dallas stepped onto the *Marathon*'s bridge. "Any word from Rixby yet?"

"She just sent through the location," Alice replied. "The transmission came from the Aizuno system. Eckhart isn't in the Atruna system at all. Either Chyke made a mistake, or the Regiment took him to Atruna first and then moved him. My money is on the second option, because Chyke doesn't make mistakes."

"Doesn't that mean we're on the wrong course?" Dallas looked at the regulators under Alice's hands. "You're still on course for Atruna."

"That's because the Regiment threatened to kill Eckhart if we went near any Regiment station. We have to get as close to Aizuno as possible without tipping our hand."

"Do you really think façades will fool them? The façade didn't work when we dropped Clifton and DeWalt at Kukuri."

"I don't plan to use a façade."

"How do you plan to find Eckhart, then?"

"We're going to repeat what we did at Kukuri, only in reverse." Alice stood up and passed Dallas on her way to the gangway. "You might as well come with me, Dallas. You're an Earthling. Maybe you can help me convince Clifton and DeWalt to risk their lives for Eckhart."

"You know they will," Dallas told her on their way out. "They wouldn't be here if they didn't want to free Eckhart."

"I don't know about that, but one more Earthling can't hurt."

Dallas chuckled. "I'm gonna remember you said that."

Alice pretended not to hear him and stepped into the galley. Clifton, DeWalt, Bing, and Akkek sat around talking while the four Iawei and the four Sataad listened in rapt awe.

"I need you two to get ready to disembark," Alice told Clifton without preamble.

Clifton looked up and his eyes widened. "Disembark…where?"

"I want to put you down at Churata in the Atruna system. It's far enough away from a Regiment station that it won't signal Admiral Keating that we're going after Eckhart."

“What do you want us to do at Churata?” DeWalt asked.

“I want you to catch another ship for Aizuno. You can pick up a freight scow to Oibus Station, which is where Eckhart is.”

“Then you do what Eckhart did at Kukuri, only in reverse,” Dallas interjected. “You break him out and steal him from the Regiment, the way he stole you from the Regiment.”

“Hey!” Alice snapped. “This is my idea.”

“I’m just explaining it. You wanted me to come along so I could explain it as an Earthling, so that’s what I did.”

“We can do that,” DeWalt added. “We’ll just need as much information as you can give us about where he is.”

“What about us?” Akkek asked. “We can slip onto the station unnoticed and…”

“No,” Alice cut in. “You aren’t taking part in this.”

“Why not?” Bing asked. “The Akeix are masters of disguise, and these five can disintegrate in and out of the station much more easily than Clifton and DeWalt.”

“They aren’t going because it’s too dangerous,” Alice explained. “If they had to start fighting the Regiment, Eckhart could get caught in the crossfire.”

“So could we,” Clifton pointed out.

“I don’t care about you scum,” Alice snarled. “I’m worried about Eckhart. Even if you screw this up and tip the Regiment off to your plans, you won’t be able to do as much damage as these five Akeix. Even one of them could destroy the whole station, and Eckhart along with it.”

“Why do you people insist on leaving us out of all your plans?” Akkek lamented. “What’s the point of having the most powerful aliens alive on your side if you’re not going to use us?”

“If I remember correctly,” Clifton replied, “Eckhart wanted to keep you in reserve for when the fringes waged a really epic battle against the Regiment. He wanted to let the other fringe groups declare a decisive victory to make it obvious that the whole fringe population was involved.”

“Does it really matter anymore what Eckhart wanted to do?” Akkek countered. “He isn’t here. We’re doing our own thing. We can change his plans.”

“What Eckhart wanted doesn’t matter,” Alice replied. “I’m making the decisions here and I say you aren’t going. Clifton and DeWalt are going alone.”

Everyone turned around to stare at her and Dallas heard those words toll through the *Marathon* like a great bell. Times had changed. Eckhart wasn't here. The *Marathon* was Alice's ship now.

None of the friends had discussed this before they left the *Atera*, but those words coming out of her mouth made them true. She *was* in charge, and what she said went in ways Eckhart's wishes never did.

Eckhart never imposed himself on anyone. He treated his crew like the friends they were. They worked together as equals even when he made decisions. He never told anyone to like it or lump it.

Dallas, Bing, Alice, and Rixby stayed on the *Marathon* because they liked Eckhart. They were comfortable with him and with the ship, and they all made good money working together. Eckhart liked it that way and it worked for years.

This was a very different *Marathon* with a very different captain in charge. Alice's statement left no room to argue. Not even Akkek said anything.

"So you want us to get off at Churata," DeWalt finally said. "We catch any old transport to Oibus Station, find Eckhart somewhere or other, and steal him away."

"Exactly," Alice replied, "preferably without the Regiment finding out he's gone until after you reach a safe distance."

Clifton snorted. "That should be pretty close to impossible."

"I have total faith in your abilities," Bing teased.

"I don't," Ephus rumbled.

The others laughed and Clifton turned to the huge Iawei. "How long have you guys been with Aistenz?"

"We were never with Aistenz," Suna replied. "We joined when we heard Eckhart was in charge."

"We never would have gone near that fleet with Aistenz in charge," Ephus added. "Aistenz was brutal and unforgiving."

"We'd much rather serve under Eckhart," Mutov finished. "Eckhart is fair."

"He's the best there is," Autov chimed in.

"Do you know Eckhart?" Dallas asked.

"We know him very well," Ephus replied. "He did a job for our father on Iawei."

Bing frowned. "When was that? I don't remember doing any job involving any Iawei."

"Eckhart worked alone then," Suna told him. "Eckhart was

young—much younger—and he didn't have his own ship. He just worked wherever he could find a job."

"When he found out what the job was, he refused to take payment," Mutov added. "He did the job for free even though he could have gotten killed doing it."

"What was the job?" Dallas asked.

"Some members of the Lion Tribe stole our father's grain," Ephus replied. "They claimed tribute from everyone in the province, and when my father refused to pay, they raided our settlement and took it by force. My father hired Eckhart to get it back, and when he told Eckhart he needed the grain to feed his family, Eckhart refused to accept any payment for it."

Bing sighed and went back to his meal. "I have a feeling we're going to be hearing a lot of stories like that about Eckhart."

"Eckhart helped my father, too," Chara chirped. "My father met Eckhart as a boy on Parilia, and later, when my father got captured by the Regiment, Eckhart found him and freed him."

"How did Eckhart find him if he was in Regiment custody?" Akkek asked.

"Eckhart was in the Regiment. He was enlisted in a company stationed where my father was incarcerated. It was pure luck that Eckhart happened to be passing through the barracks where my father was housed, and my father called out to him. Eckhart could have gotten shot for treason if he had gotten caught."

A gasp went through the galley. "Are you seriously suggesting that Eckhart was in the Regiment?"

"How else could he have been in a Regiment barracks?" Chara asked.

"I don't believe it!" Bing muttered. "No one hates the Regiment more than Eckhart. He couldn't have been one of them."

Dallas winced. "It's true. He was in the Regiment after he left Parilia. That's why he started hating them. He saw firsthand what they would do to keep the fringe aliens down."

"How did you know about this?" Alice demanded.

"He told me…when Clifton and DeWalt were stuck at Kukuri. He resigned from the Regiment because he couldn't stand participating in their massacres anymore."

"I can't believe it!" Bing exclaimed. "This isn't the Eckhart I knew and loved."

"Eckhart is a good man," Alia chirped. "We would do anything

for him.”

“Is that why you asked us to take you on board?” Innyria asked. “Is that why you were so excited to join Eckhart’s fleet?”

“Of course! We wanted to help him. We just never imagined it would be like this.”

“Well, now we all have a warm, fuzzy story about Eckhart,” Alice snarled. “Can we get to work now? Clifton, DeWalt, you’ll both need to arm up.”

“Do we really want to do that?” Clifton asked. “If we’re going to a Regiment station, we should go incognito. We should blend in and look like harmless civilians.”

“Did you just use the word ‘incognito’ in a sentence?” Bing teased.

“You must have imagined it,” Clifton replied, and everyone laughed.

“I don’t care what you do as long as you go.” Alice turned away. “Get ready to deploy. We’ll drop you off as soon as we reach Atruna.”

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5

“Do you know what you have to do?” Dallas asked.

Clifton touched Dallas’ armored shoulder. It didn’t feel like touching a real person or even an alien. Dallas’ armor didn’t give at all. “I don’t have a clue what I have to do, but I guess we’ll just wing it.”

“Be careful out there,” Dallas repeated for about the twentieth time. “Don’t take any unnecessary risks. If you can’t get Eckhart out, retreat and try to contact us. Don’t throw your lives away for nothing.”

Clifton glanced behind Dallas, but the *Marathon*’s cargo hold was empty. “Don’t let Alice hear you saying that. She’d rather we did throw our lives away even if we can’t get Eckhart out.”

“She’s just anxious because she’s worried about Eckhart. We all are.”

Clifton pulled out the sidearm Dallas gave him. DeWalt was checking his own sidearm at the same time.

Clifton opened the magazine and re-holstered the weapon. It would be too small to do much good if anything serious happened on Oibus, but it was better than nothing.

He and DeWalt were only taking these weapons to make it less obvious that they didn’t belong on the fringes at all.

They wouldn’t be able to hide the fact that they were Earthlings, so Clifton resolved not to try. He had to take a page out of Eckhart’s book and just try to act as naturally as possible.

“You remember what Alice said,” Dallas was saying. “We’ll keep the *Marathon* in orbit around Churata until we hear from you. We won’t be able to launch a full assault against Oibus, but we might be able to do something.”

Clifton nodded. “I know.”

Dallas sighed and jutted his chin past Clifton’s shoulder. “Take care of yourselves, and come back in one piece.”

“Thanks, man.” Clifton squeezed Dallas’ arm one more time, and DeWalt stuck out his hand to shake Dallas’.

Then Clifton and DeWalt walked out of the hatch into the bustling city of Churata. Clifton didn’t look back. He didn’t want to

see the *Marathon* getting farther away.

He'd been trying to find a way to be a part of the *Marathon* crew since Eckhart had first rescued him and DeWalt from Kukuri. Clifton had thought for a while that he was a part of the crew, but unavoidable circumstances tore him away from the ship.

Now he was leaving it behind. He believed wholeheartedly in getting Eckhart away from the Regiment. Clifton just didn't want to leave the *Marathon* to do it.

DeWalt studied the aliens swarming around them. "How do we find this transport to Oibus?"

"The Regiment will have some presence on this planet. We'll go there. We'll stick out less if we make it look like we're attached to the Regiment." Clifton studied his friend. He couldn't think of DeWalt as his boss anymore. Their relationship had completely transformed since they'd left Earth. "Are you okay?"

"Sure," DeWalt replied. "If it helps Eckhart, I'm there."

"It's ironic, isn't it? We're doing exactly the same thing for him that he did for us on Kukuri."

"Not exactly. The whole damn Regiment wasn't out to kill us then, and they weren't looking out for the whole fringe population to try to rescue us, either. That was one advantage Eckhart had that we don't. He was totally anonymous."

"We could do what he did on Taio," Clifton suggested. "We could get ourselves captured to get the Regiment to take us to him. That's what Eckhart would do in this situation."

DeWalt smiled at him, but it was a sad smile. "Neither of us is Eckhart, my friend, and we have no guarantee that the Regiment would take us to him. They might just shoot us and dump our bodies."

"You're right. In fact, I'm sure they would."

DeWalt laughed. He sounded and acted so different from the DeWalt that Clifton used to know.

Deep, penetrating calm permeated everything DeWalt did and said nowadays. He seemed so far away from everything that nothing could touch him. He acted like he'd seen it all, even though he'd only been on the fringes a little while.

He looked different, too. He'd lost the soft, baby-faced look he had when he left Earth. He'd become leaner, harder, and his eyes flashed with a strange flintiness. He no longer wore a suit. He wore beaten canvas pants and a leather bomber jacket like Eckhart's.

DeWalt surveyed the aliens around him. “I almost envy Eckhart belonging to this world. Everyone accepts him. He can go anywhere. No one treats him like something the cat dragged in because he’s an Earthling.”

“He’s hardly an Earthling. He’s never been to Earth or even to the Earth solar system. That’s why everyone respects him. He keeps saying his heart belongs to the fringes, and it’s true.”

“That’s what I mean,” DeWalt replied. “I almost regret that the aliens will win and drive all Earthlings back to Earth. It would be nice to explore this world and get to know it as well as Eckhart does. It’s fascinating once you get over the initial revulsion that everyone is an alien.”

Clifton cocked his head and studied DeWalt more closely. “You sound awfully certain that the aliens will win and drive all Earthlings back to Earth. What makes you so sure?”

“Are you kidding? Of course the aliens will win.”

“I just mean…”

“Think about it. The aliens’ combined force outnumbers the Regiment by thousands of times. The numbers of aliens who are battle-capable and who could come out of the woodwork to fight the Regiment is greater than the entire Earthling population on every single one of Earth’s colonies. There’s no chance—no chance at all.”

Clifton shrugged. “You’re right.”

“This…” DeWalt waved at nothing in particular. “This means nothing. Not even Eckhart means anything in the overall scheme of things. He’s a great leader and he’s a perfect firebrand to rally the aliens to fight back, but in the end, they don’t really need him. He’s the spark to the powder keg, but he won’t win or lose the long-term war. Even if we fail and the Regiment kills him, the aliens will still overrun the Regiment and drive them out. It’s only a matter of time.”

Clifton nodded. He knew DeWalt was right, but he didn’t like to think about it. He especially didn’t want to think about himself being trapped on the fringes when the tide turned against the Regiment and Earth.

“The war will go even worse for the Regiment if they do kill Eckhart,” DeWalt went on. “They don’t understand how much he means to the fringes. If they kill him, his death would galvanize the fringes like nothing else. Getting revenge for his death would bring

the gangs together and give them that extra push to finish off the Regiment forever."

Clifton forced a laugh. "You've thought this over a lot better than I have. Maybe you should take command of the fringe army in Rixby's place."

DeWalt didn't take the joke. He wouldn't even look at Clifton. DeWalt kept squinting at the crowds all around him. "I have to think of something to keep my spirits up just in case we don't reach him in time—or if we fail."

Those words chilled Clifton's heart, and he didn't say anything else on their way through Churata. Clifton didn't want to think about what would happen if he and DeWalt failed to free Eckhart.

Clifton and DeWalt both owed Eckhart their lives. Clifton had never met anyone like Eckhart—ever. Clifton never respected or looked up to anyone as much, not even during all his years in the Regiment.

In just a few short weeks, Clifton's whole life had changed. Everything he thought he valued and admired became nothing. Earth and its system barely existed for him anymore.

Only DeWalt and the Marathon crew mattered now. They were his people, his crew, his family in ways no one else ever had been before.

Clifton thought nothing of turning his back on Earth and the Regiment as long as Eckhart was in charge of the fringes. Eckhart had showed Clifton the way. Eckhart convinced Clifton that he was on the right side. Eckhart showed it every hour of every day.

DeWalt bumped Clifton's elbow and brought him back to reality. They passed through a crowded market and emerged on the other side. Clifton didn't notice anything out of the ordinary until DeWalt nodded toward a battered old ship parked between a few crumbling buildings.

Nothing about it stuck out as unusual until Clifton noticed five Earthling men working around the ship's hull. Two of them stood guard by the open hatch, while the other three loaded cargo into the hold.

They all looked as scruffy and worn as the ship itself, but they were definitely Earthlings. They looked like smugglers or maybe gunrunners. They didn't look like they were up to any good, which meant they had nothing to do with the Regiment—not officially, at least.

How strange they looked. Clifton had been around aliens for so long that he wasn't used to seeing Earthlings anymore.

He had seen Eckhart and DeWalt enough times, and now Major Martin Staton was on the *Atera*, too. Clifton had even seen Admirals Keating and Ferris recently, but for some reason, seeing these men on Churata jarred Clifton.

Were these men really the same species as himself and DeWalt? They looked so out of place in this alien landscape.

"Let's go." DeWalt started forward. He walked right up to the men guarding the hatch.

They stiffened at his approach and tightened their grips on their weapons. They straightened up, but DeWalt only relaxed his posture even more.

He sidled up to the one on the right, and DeWalt clinked three chips between his fingers. He did it obviously so all five of the men could see and hear them.

"How ya doin'?" DeWalt drawled. "We're looking for passage to Oibus. We'll pay for it."

The first one scowled at DeWalt and then glanced down at the chips. "You don't want to wave those around where anybody can see them, Mister. You could get hurt doing that."

"What—these?" DeWalt held up the chips. "We'll pay more than this for passage to Oibus, but you won't see the rest until we get there. What do you say?"

"What do you want to go to Oibus for?" The guy scanned up and down DeWalt's clothes. "What are two Earthlings like you doing out here, anyway? There's a war on Earthlings going on, you know."

"I know." DeWalt shot the guy a return glance. "What are *you* boys doing out here? You're the first Earthlings we've seen in a long time."

The two guards exchanged a glance that sent Clifton a message loud and clear. These men weren't gunrunners or smugglers. Earthling smugglers wouldn't be operating this far out on the fringes.

They must be attached to the Regiment, which meant they were undercover doing something. Did they know about Eckhart?

The guy glanced over at Clifton. "Do I know you from somewhere?"

"I doubt it," Clifton replied. "Do we have a deal or not?"

"Not until you tell us your business at Oibus. We pick and

choose who we work for."

"How much would you take not to ask any questions?" DeWalt asked. "Name your price."

The guy snorted. "How much do you have?"

DeWalt held out one of the chips, and when the guy tried to take it, DeWalt yanked it out of his reach much faster than Clifton would have expected from DeWalt. "I'll tell you what. I'll give you one of these every time you ask me why I want to go to Oibus. Every time I give you one of these, you agree to shut your mouth and don't ask again. Understand?"

The guy's lips twisted in a cruel grin. "I guess I can go along with that."

DeWalt handed over the chip. "What's your name?"

"Paulson, and this…" The guy aimed his thumb at the man next to him. "This is Hawkins."

"Good to meet you."

As soon as Paulson said his name, Clifton recognized him. When Clifton was in the service, Paulson had belonged to an elite special forces squad that performed high-risk tactical hits on alien targets deep inside the fringes. Paulson was practically a ghost.

So Clifton was right about these guys. They were deep undercover. They didn't just appear on Churata out of nowhere. They were attached to the Regiment, and not in any way that boded well for Clifton and DeWalt.

Clifton considered calling the whole thing off when Paulson asked, "What are your names?"

DeWalt held out another chip. "When are you scheduled to leave?"

Paulson stared at him and then at the chip. Then Paulson grinned and took the chip. "As soon as we finish loading up."

"Then my friend and I will go on board and make ourselves comfortable. You can let us know when we enter orbit around Oibus."

Paulson laughed and the rest of his crew relaxed. The other three had stopped working to listen to the conversation. Paulson and Hawkins parted to let Clifton and DeWalt through.

Clifton hesitated again, but DeWalt was handling himself so well that Clifton decided not to interrupt. DeWalt behaved so flawlessly that Clifton could almost trick himself that this wasn't Eckhart after all.

DeWalt strolled up the ramp into the ship. Paulson scowled at Clifton. “Are you sure we haven’t met?”

“No, we haven’t met,” Clifton said truthfully. He had never been introduced to Paulson, knowing him only by reputation.

Clifton found DeWalt in the hold. DeWalt wandered amongst cartons and crates stacked all over the place, studying the labels with interest. “What do you think these guys are transporting?”

“What are you doing?” Clifton whispered. “These guys are Regiment—or former Regiment. They know exactly who we are.”

“I know,” DeWalt murmured under his breath.

Clifton stared at his friend and his jaw dropped. He almost asked how DeWalt knew, but the look on DeWalt’s face told Clifton all he needed to know.

DeWalt only smiled at him and went back to studying the cartons. “We should probably find whatever cabins or quarters this crew wants us to use on our way to Oibus.”

He wandered off down a corridor toward the back of the ship. The loading crew returned carrying more stuff, and Clifton took the hint.

He followed DeWalt to the very back of the ship, where DeWalt stuck his head into a random crew cabin. “This one is taken. Someone has a family back on Earth. Look.”

He pointed to a picture of Hawkins with a woman and a bunch of smiling kids. Clifton never would have recognized the man in the picture as the same person as that scruffy space pirate outside.

DeWalt crossed the corridor and opened another cabin. This one was empty, without even any blankets on the berth mattress.

Clifton rushed him, shoved DeWalt into the cabin, shut the door behind him, and dropped his voice to a whisper. “You didn’t tell me! When did it happen?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Clifton,” DeWalt replied.

“Don’t give me that shit!” Clifton hissed. “Akkek said you took her power and it was temporary. She got it back…so when did yours come back? How else could you know those guys belonged to the Regiment?”

DeWalt shrugged and tried to turn away, but Clifton grabbed him and spun him around. “You better tell me! I’m not going to Oibus with you if you don’t tell me everything—now, DeWalt! When did you get it back?”

DeWalt shrugged again, and this time, his shoulders slumped. “It isn’t back—not completely. It’s been slow, and I don’t have it all. I just got a sense outside—nothing definite.”

“You’re lying!” Clifton whispered. “You’re downplaying it so I don’t get my hopes up. How much do you have? Can you disintegrate?”

DeWalt looked down at the floor. “No. I’m sorry. I wish I could.”

Clifton let out a shaky breath. “Okay.”

“I…” DeWalt faltered. “I think I might be able to influence people, though. I haven’t tried it because I didn’t want to manipulate Eckhart and his people on the *Atera*…but I think I can give these guys a nudge to help us out.”

“I sure as hell hope so—and one more thing, DeWalt,” Clifton whispered. “Don’t you dare keep anything like this from me ever again. If anything changes, you tell me. Don’t leave me in the dark.”

DeWalt smiled even more sadly. “Okay, buddy. I won’t.”

“You better not.” Clifton glared at DeWalt and barely recognized him. Everything kept changing so fast that Clifton struggled to keep up. “What else can you do?”

“Nothing. That’s all. I’ve told you everything.”

Clifton relaxed. “Okay. How much did you pick up from those guys outside?”

“Only that they knew something weird was going on at Oibus. The Regiment tipped them off about someone trying to reach the station, except that Paulson and his crew were expecting it to be aliens. They don’t understand why Earthlings would want to go there. Paulson and his crew aren’t sure if *we’re* with the Regiment or not.”

“Good.” Clifton sank down on the berth. “That’s something in our favor, at least.”

DeWalt pulled out the pocketful of chips that Alice gave him. “Take these. You keep them.”

“Don’t you want to keep them for bribing Paulson to keep his mouth shut?”

“I don’t want him to get any ideas about slitting my throat and stealing them. I don’t want him to see me with more than the original three. Then maybe he’ll wonder which of us really holds the purse strings.”

Clifton snorted, but he couldn’t laugh outright. “Smart. Maybe you should run a smuggling crew on the fringes when this is all

over.”

Now it was DeWalt’s turn to lower his voice to a whisper. “Neither of us will ever set foot on the fringes again after this. When the aliens win this war, Eckhart will be the only Earthling alive on the fringes, and it will stay that way until he dies. Then there will be no Earthlings out here at all.”

Clifton looked up at his friend, but he didn’t answer. DeWalt sounded so certain about the outcome of this war, and he painted such a stark picture of it that Clifton shivered.

The fringes would be so much more dangerous with no Earthlings anywhere—not that the Earthlings made much difference now.

If the alien population succeeded in driving the Regiment out, the fringes would revert to a vast, black abyss of lawless chaos. It would become something too terrifying for Earthlings even to imagine—a place no one dared to enter for fear of all the manifest horrors taking place there. It would become something to haunt children’s nightmares.

Clifton snapped alert when footsteps approached down the corridor. He stuffed the chips into his inner jacket pocket where no one would see them.

The footsteps halted right outside the door. Someone was either searching for him and DeWalt, or trying to listen to their conversation.

Clifton ripped the door open to find Hawkins standing there. Hawkins looked back and forth between the two passengers. “We’ll be leaving in ten minutes.”

“Thanks.” Clifton held the man’s gaze until Hawkins beat it.

Clifton didn’t relax until he knew he and DeWalt were alone. “We better share this cabin. It has two berths. I don’t trust these guys not to kill us in our sleep.”

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6

Clifton jolted out of a fitful sleep when someone banged hard on the cabin door. He jolted upright. “Who’s there?”

“It’s me—Hawkins!” came the gruff voice. “We’re entering orbit at Oibus in fifteen minutes.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

Clifton swung his legs over the side of his berth. DeWalt stood up from the bottom bunk. “We better get ready to go.”

Clifton rubbed his eyes and dragged his head back into the game. Oibus. He and DeWalt were going to Oibus Station to rescue Eckhart. They were on a smugglers’ vessel somewhere in space.

Clifton hopped down to the floor. DeWalt was checking his sidearm. Neither Clifton nor DeWalt had taken their clothes off since they set foot on this tub.

They both put on their jackets and went forward to the cockpit. Paulson and Hawkins sat side by side, Paulson at the pilot’s station and Hawkins manning a gunnery station next to him. The other three were strapped into seats against one side of the hull behind Paulson.

Clifton bent over Paulson’s shoulder and looked at the controls. “Where’s the sentry crossing?”

“Coming up now.”

A screen blinked on in front of Paulson and a clean-cut major appeared. “Angkarn *Vagrex*, Insignia GBAW467, state your origin and destination.”

“Origin Churata, destination Trekeg Station.”

“State your business at Oibus Station.”

“Delivery of cargo designation ADHO309 and two passengers to disembark.”

The major frowned at his controls off the screen. “Transmit passenger identity data.”

Paulson did something on his instruments. “Don’t worry about it,” he muttered over his shoulder. “We’ll send fake data so they don’t—”

“Stand down, *Vagrex*!” the major barked. “Our scans are picking up alien DNA on board your vessel. Full stop and hold your

position."

"No, no, no!" Paulson exclaimed. "There are no aliens. You can see they're Earthlings! Look at 'em!"

He tilted the screen upward to point it at Clifton and DeWalt.

"Negative, *Vagrex*," the major replied. "Picking up two alien signatures. Hold your position. I repeat, do not advance any further or we'll open fire."

Paulson whipped around in his seat and stared at Clifton. "What the hell! What the hell game are you trying to play?"

"We're Earthlings!" Clifton countered. "You can see that for yourselves. I don't know what they're trying to do, but—"

He didn't get a chance to finish before a blistering Datrium pulse ripped out of the station and slammed the smugglers' ship full in the starboard wing.

"What the hell!" Paulson attacked his controls.

Hawkins swung his gun up. "The station is firing on us!"

Paulson stopped what he was doing to seize Hawkins' arm before he could fire. "No! Don't fire on the station!"

"Why not?" Another jet of plasma scorched across the ship's nose. "To hell with this!"

The ship wobbled several times as Paulson struggled to wrestle it under control. More Datrium shots erupted out of Oibus Station. They pelted the ship on all sides, and in a second, Paulson cursed under his breath.

"Forget it! I'm pulling out."

Clifton expected DeWalt to protest, but with so much Datrium spouting from the station, neither of the passengers argued.

Paulson pulled the *Vagrex* hard to port and zoomed away. He left the station far behind and Clifton's heart sank. So much for the rescue mission.

Paulson raced around the other side of the planet where the station's guns couldn't reach. He set down in a remote canyon hidden from everyone.

Paulson yanked his safety harness off, shot out of his seat, and rounded on Clifton and DeWalt. "Now you two better start talking. Who the hell are you and what are you doing here?"

"I'm telling you the truth!" Clifton fired back. "We're both Earthlings! There's no way we could turn up with alien DNA."

"That doesn't answer my question," Paulson snapped. "There are no Earthlings this far out on the fringes, much less ones trying to

reach Regiment stations in the middle of a war between aliens and Earth."

Clifton started to counter by saying he had no idea why the sentry crossing read him and DeWalt as aliens, but DeWalt interrupted.

"If we tell you what we're doing here, you have to tell us the same thing, Paulson," DeWalt murmured. "You're working for the Regiment, aren't you? Cargo designation ADHO309 is classified as a hazardous military-grade non-tradeable substance."

Clifton spun around to stare at his friend. How in the hell did DeWalt know that?

DeWalt kept his flintiest gaze locked on Paulson. "You boys are running toxic materials for the Regiment. You wouldn't be out here otherwise."

"That doesn't mean shit!" Paulson fired back. "We aren't aliens."

"We aren't aliens, either," Clifton cut in. "We're as Earthling as you are."

"You're lying," Hawkins cut in. "You could be in disguise."

"I was born and raised in Billings, Montana," Clifton blurted out. "I went to basic training at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, and I served in the Regiment in the 398th Mobile Company."

Paulson narrowed his eyes at him. "You could have made that up."

Clifton thought fast. "You were in the Blue Angels, Paulson. You were at Fort Hood between the Aso campaign and the Battle of Lagmai. I saw you there. You were with…" Clifton racked his memory to remember exactly who he saw at Fort Hood so many years back then. "You were with Holleman, Stockbridge, and Willis. They were all in the Blue Angels with you."

Paulson pursed his lips. "All right. That settles you. What about him?" He jerked his chin at DeWalt. "Who are you, Mister?"

"You're violating our agreement, Paulson," DeWalt breezed. "Are you going to hand me back all the chips I've given you to keep your nose out of our business?"

"This is my business, asshole!" Paulson bellowed. "Everything to do with my ship is my business and you just got us shot at by a Regiment sentry crossing. You could have gotten us all killed."

DeWalt shrugged. "I'm not an alien. I'm an Earthling, too."

"Who are you, then?"

"What difference does it make?" Hawkins interrupted. "I say we

shoot ‘em both right now, take their chips, and beat it. No one will miss them, whoever they are.”

“I wouldn’t do that if I was you,” DeWalt murmured.

“Why the hell not?” Hawkins pulled out his sidearm and aimed it right at DeWalt’s face. “Hand over all your chips right now and I just might let you live.”

“I don’t have any chips.” DeWalt turned out his pockets. “See? I already gave Paulson my last one. I’m penniless.”

Clifton detected the tiniest hint of a smile tugging the corners of DeWalt’s lips. He was telling the truth. He didn’t have a chip to his name, but Hawkins noticed the same thing. “You’re lying, chump. Hand ‘em over before I…”

Clifton braced himself to draw his sidearm and shoot his way out of the ship. Hawkins pointed his sidearm at DeWalt’s eye and his knuckles whitened on the trigger, but at that moment, a different shot erupted behind Clifton’s back.

A stream of Datrium sliced past Clifton’s shoulder, cut through his jacket sleeve, and raced straight for DeWalt. It would have killed DeWalt for sure, but instead, it sailed right through him.

Clifton’s instincts kicked in. He dove sideways, slammed down hard on the floor, whipped onto his side, and yanked his own weapon.

The other three crewmen stood behind him. All of them had unbuckled their harnesses while Paulson and Hawkins confronted Clifton and DeWalt. Now all three of them aimed their weapons at Clifton and DeWalt, and smoke billowed from one barrel.

Clifton fired on the shooter and all three of them swiveled their guns downward. They would all blow him away in a second. He could only hope to go down shooting.

The shooter raised his sidearm one more time, but at that moment, a deafening blast echoed through the ship. It thumped Clifton’s ears and he ducked automatically.

All three gunmen hurtled off their feet, hit the ship’s hull, and evaporated through it. They vanished beyond the solid steel bulkhead.

A distant scream sounded outside in the vacuum of the planet’s surface and then cut off just as fast. Clifton jerked his sidearm the other way, but Paulson and Hawkins were both gone, too. No one was there except DeWalt.

DeWalt hustled over to Clifton, grabbed his wrist, and hoisted

Clifton to his feet. “Get up! You’ll have to fly the ship.”

“What…what did you do, DeWalt?” Clifton panted.

“I disintegrated them outside the hull. I had to get rid of them. They’re dead now.”

“You said—”

DeWalt waved that away. “It came back when I realized we were in danger. It doesn’t matter. We have to get over to the station and I can’t fly this thing.”

Clifton blinked at his friend. So DeWalt’s power was back—all of it?

“Clifton!” DeWalt raised his voice to a bark. “Fly the ship!”

“Oh. Right.” Clifton dropped into Paulson’s old place. He still scrambled to orient himself to this new situation.

DeWalt sat down in Hawkins’ place. “We won’t be able to fly right up to the station, so I need you to park us somewhere out of sight but not too far away.”

“What do you mean, we won’t be able to fly to the station? How are we supposed to get there if we don’t fly?”

“I’ll take us there. Just…” DeWalt shot another pointed glance at the controls. “Fly the ship, Clifton.”

Clifton didn’t ask any more questions. He also made sure to keep his eyes off the scanners. He didn’t want to see so much Earthling blood and guts lying around outside the ship’s hull. He didn’t want to think about the crew whose vessel DeWalt had just stolen.

Clifton fired up the engines and rotated the *Vagrex* toward Oibus Station. DeWalt kept doing things to Hawkins’ controls, but Clifton didn’t pay attention to that, either. If DeWalt’s power was even partially back, this mission was going to turn into something very, very different from what Clifton initially thought.

He flew up the canyons and defiles, getting closer to the station until DeWalt pointed to something on the map chart. “There. Set down there.”

Clifton did as he was told. He wasn’t looking forward to seeing what DeWalt had in mind for traveling across a barren planet with no atmosphere.

DeWalt indicated a flat plateau between two high cliffs. Clifton rotated the *Vagrex* and extended the landing gear, but before he could set down, another ship blasted overhead, hammering the whole area with shots.

“What the hell!” DeWalt bent forward and tried to peer up at the

sky. “What was that?”

“Someone is shooting at us!” Another dozen explosions peppered the plateau and knocked the *Vagrex* out of position. “Screw it! We can’t land in this.”

He ripped the ship into the air and retracted the landing gear as another fourteen ships rocketed into view. Clifton took half a second to realize they were Velocities.

They wheeled through the canyons, exchanging shots with another cluster of fighters racing behind them. Both groups swirled around the *Vagrex*, and Datrium jets aimed at the newcomers hit the smugglers’ vessel instead.

“Why are they shooting at us?” DeWalt yelped.

“Who cares? Return fire!” Clifton steered out of the canyon in a dead sprint. His heart sank when DeWalt tried to get hold of the big gun in front of him. He didn’t know what to do with it.

The Velocities and the fighters zoomed away into the atmosphere, and a second later, a whole flock of much larger ships descended through the atmosphere.

They came from many different classes, and some of their signatures on the *Vagrex’s* readouts came up in different languages Clifton didn’t recognize.

They opened fire on each other, and when Clifton tried to get away from them, the attackers sent out fighters to hunt the *Vagrex* down.

DeWalt swung his gun around to return their fire, but he didn’t get his shots away in time. The enemy rocketed away, and more ships plunged through the atmosphere to fire at each other.

“Forget this!” DeWalt yelled. “I’m going to disintegrate them.”

“No!” Clifton countered. “Stay where you are. We’re getting out of here.”

“Why not?” DeWalt hollered. “They’re attacking us! We have to!”

“No!” Clifton bellowed. “They aren’t attacking us. They’re Jackal Clan and Chosen fighting each other. The gangs are fighting each other.”

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7

Clifton pushed the *Vagrex* to its full speed beating a path back to Churata, but as soon as he got out of Oibus' orbit, he ran into an even bigger space battle raging as far as the eye could see.

What he first took for a gang war between the Jackal Clan and the Chosen included ships from the Immortals, too. Dozens of ships from all sides blocked the route back to Churata. They all fired on each other, and as soon as the *Vagrex* showed up, the aliens turned their guns on the *Vagrex*, too.

"Shoot, DeWalt!" Clifton roared. "What are you waiting for?"

"You said not to!" DeWalt replied. "You said—"

"I said not to disintegrate them."

DeWalt said something else that Clifton didn't catch. More Datrium bursts slammed the *Vagrex's* sides.

"Where's the *Marathon*?" DeWalt shrieked.

"Just shoot!"

"Who should I shoot?" DeWalt asked.

"I don't care!" Clifton fired back. "If it isn't the *Marathon*, shoot it. Shoot anything that moves."

DeWalt rotated his gun back to aim at a herd of fighters racing up behind the *Vagrex*. He popped off several shots as the fighters tumbled past, but Clifton couldn't fly any further.

A line of giant freighters stood guard over Churata. They unloaded on any ship that tried to break through to the planet.

The Jackal Clan Velocities rocketed behind the Chosen fighters, driving the enemy into the freighters' guns. The freighters stayed where they were and destroyed any vessel that came within range. Clifton couldn't break through that way.

He wheeled into reverse and buried himself in the battle, but with so many different ships all shooting at once, he couldn't find any place to hide.

He tried to break through back to Oibus until the Velocities swooped around and plunged in for another pass. Their guns tore the battle apart and smashed into the *Vagrex*.

DeWalt yelled and a shower of sparks erupted out of the dashboard into his face. The smoke cleared and Clifton stared at a

gaping hole in the console in front of the DeWalt. The big gun was gone.

Clifton gave it up and floored the engines. He headed back toward Oibus to hide in the canyons again, and he ran headfirst into a whole squadron of Banshees launching from the station.

They spread out to cover the whole battle. No one could reach the station. Clifton feared the worst now that the alien gangs had brought their fight too close to Oibus. Was Eckhart already dead?

A secret voice whispered in Clifton's brain. *Eckhart is still alive. The Regiment will not kill him. He's too valuable.*

Chyke. Clifton didn't know how he knew, but he was certain he was communicating with the telepathic Silent Death representative.

Go back toward Churata, Clifton. The Marathon *is waiting for you there. I am communicating to Alice that you are on this vessel. She will rendezvous with you.*

Clifton couldn't be relieved by Chyke's assurance. Going back toward Churata was the absolute last thing Clifton wanted to do right now, but he had nothing else to do and nowhere else to go. At least someone in this crazy battle knew where he and DeWalt were.

He pulled the *Vagrex* around and faced directly into the Velocities' guns. The Velocities opened fire even more ferociously, but the Banshees caught up before the Velocities could do too much damage to the *Vagrex*.

The Banshees crept up on the *Vagrex*'s tail. They hounded the smugglers' vessel straight into the Velocities" teeth…and the next minute, the *Vagrex* plunged past the Velocities, with the Banshees facing off against the Jackal Clan in a fountain of Datrium.

"Don't!" DeWalt shrieked, but Clifton didn't listen. He slammed the throttle down and zoomed for the freighters blockading Churata.

All the freighters swiveled their weapons to destroy the smugglers' craft, but instead of blowing the *Vagrex* to smithereens, the *Vagrex* vaporized straight through them to the other side.

Clifton blinked down at the planet hovering before his eyes. He hardly dared to believe his eyes when he feasted his gaze on the *Marathon* right in front of him. He checked his instruments. The freighters were behind him, with several Regiment Colossuses booming in to engage the Immortals' line.

The *Marathon* turned its open hatch toward the *Vagrex* and the ship glided into the familiar cargo hold. Everything that happened

on Oibus felt like a bad dream—except for one thing.

Eckhart was still down there.

Clifton and DeWalt stepped out of the *Vagrex*. No one came to meet them. The *Marathon* was silent, except that it was still flying around in space.

Clifton and DeWalt headed up to the bridge without seeing anyone. That on its own was strange. The ship had more crew now than it ever did before, so where was everybody?

They walked in on Alice engaged in a furious argument with Rory Vagill and Dickat Norheall, while Akkek, Dallas, Innyria, and Bing stood around listening.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Alice snapped. "You deliberately interfered with our rescue operation to get Eckhart off Oibus Station. You could have gotten him killed."

"No one cares about Eckhart anymore," Dickat countered. "He's washed up. He's useless to us. Trying to save him is only stopping us from attacking the Regiment the way we planned. As soon as we stop thinking about him, the sooner we can bring this rebellion to a successful conclusion."

"There is no rebellion!" Akkek cut in. "You're engaged in a petty gang war with the Jackal Clan and the Chosen."

"We're not engaged in a gang war with anyone," Namol interjected on a different communications channel. "The Immortals attacked us. We only defended ourselves."

"Get your freighters away from Churata, Rory!" Alice ordered. "You're inciting the Regiment and threatening Eckhart's life."

"None of us takes orders from you—or from anyone else," Rory snarled. "The fringes recognize no authority—"

A familiar chirpy voice cut in as the *Atera* and the rest of Eckhart's fleet rolled into orbit over Churata. "You swore an oath of loyalty to Eckhart, Rory. If you brand yourself a traitor, you'll be treated as a traitor. Is that really what you want?"

Rory bared his teeth and glared at everyone through the communications system. "You don't have the authority to do anything to me. The Immortals don't recognize—"

The image of the two gang lords smeared and flickered. It stuttered and then vanished. "What's the problem?" Alice rounded on Alia, who stood at Rixby's old station. "Get them back."

"The interference isn't coming from any ship," Rixby replied. "It's coming from the planet."

“What do you mean?” Alia asked, but before anyone could answer, a fresh wave of ships launched from Churata’s surface.

They registered no life signs, or even any power signatures. They moved through space in ghostly silence, and Clifton shivered at the sight of them.

“Silent Death!” Akkek whispered.

Alice pounced on her regulators. “Rory! Dickat! Do you copy? You need to communicate your loyalty to Eckhart now—before it’s too late.”

“There’s no answer,” Alia murmured. “There’s no communications coming or going from any Immortals ship. They’re all dead in the water.”

The tactical grid changed to reveal the battle raging between Churata and Oibus. The Jackal Clan and the Chosen still fought a gathering mob of Regiment craft.

The Immortals’ freighters and a bunch of other large battle craft sat motionless without shooting at anything. Every light and energy signature coming from them had died completely.

“Shit!” Alice husked through her mask. “This is going to be bad.”

The gunshots and explosions going on inside the battle faded. Everyone present held their breath watching the Silent Death ships creep up on their prey.

The Silent Death ships surrounded the battle, but they didn’t attack. What horrors would Silent Death visit on the traitorous Immortals for betraying their pact with the fringe population?

The Regiment noticed the lull and plunged in to attack the defenseless Immortals, but an almighty shockwave burst somewhere inside the battle. It flung the Regiment back toward Oibus, and at the same instant, the shaggy, ragged head of Chyke appeared inside Clifton’s head.

I am communicating with all of you simultaneously. You will be able to see and hear everything that all of you says.

At his word, Namol and Vuldak appeared alongside Rixby, Squids, and Alice.

Rory Vagill and Dickat Norheall are dead. Anyone who violates their oath to the fringes will die. There will be no mercy and no repudiation. Any alien who betrays our cause will die now. Does the Jackal Clan pledge its loyalty to our cause?

Of course, Chyke, Namol replied. *The Jackal Clan has never*

wavered for an instant.

And does the Chosen renounce this vendetta against the Jackal Clan, Vuldak? You are either a part of our army, or you can go your own way to seek revenge for ancient slights. Make your decision now if you want to live.

O…of course, Chyke. Vuldak didn't sound nearly as certain as Namol did.

I am communicating with the Immortals, Chyke went on. *I will exact the rebel alliance's vengeance against any backsliders.*

Several of the freighters detonated in withering explosions. They lit up the battlefield, and scattered fighters ruptured to scrap in seconds.

This force will remain united from now on, Chyke ordered. *Any ship or crew that violates their oath will be instantly destroyed.*

Chyke and the other gang leaders vanished. Alice collapsed back in her seat. "Phew! That was a close one."

"Here comes the Regiment!" Alia screamed. "They're advancing for another assault!"

Attack Oibus Station and wipe it off the map, Chyke whispered in Clifton's ear.

What about Eckhart? The same question passed from mind to mind through the *Marathon* bridge staff.

Eckhart is not on Oibus anymore. The Regiment has moved him somewhere else.

Clifton tried to ask questions, but Chyke had already disappeared.

Rixby suffered no such misgivings. Her chirpy voice echoed through the alien fleet. "Attack! All ships—assault Oibus Station and destroy it! Destroy every Regiment ship! Don't leave anyone alive down there."

The fringe aliens launched instantly. The Velocities spun around and rocketed at the oncoming Colossuses. The Jackal Clan and the Chosen fell in line with each other, their conflict forgotten now that they had a common enemy.

Alice seized the regulators, but before she even succeeded in turning the *Marathon* around, two matched starbursts of brilliant light blasted off the bridge. They hurtled straight through the front wall and soared into the battle blazing in blinding glory.

Clifton caught his breath as DeWalt and Akkek zoomed into the battle, destroying everything in their path. They parted and

whizzed in opposite directions.

DeWalt flew toward an enormous Colossus and vanished inside it. The ship continued hammering the Chosen with Datrium shots for a second before the ship shuddered and groaned.

“Get back!” Alice bellowed. “Pull back—all ships! Get away from the Colossus.”

The Jackal Clan reacted and the Velocities reversed out of danger, but some of the Chosen didn’t get the message in time.

The Colossus juddered for a second, and then blasted outward in an unholy tide of burning Datrium and scrap metal. The shockwave caught the stricken ships in its wake and carried them with it.

Akkek swerved down the line of Colossuses. The Banshees gathered behind the larger ships and formed up for another assault on the fringe aliens.

They launched in front of the Colossuses to pounce on the Velocities, and at that moment, Akkek looped around the Colossuses. She hurtled up the line of Banshees, disintegrated through them, and they detonated one after the other.

The exploding Banshees formed a wall of flame blocking everyone from reaching Oibus. The Colossuses stood guard behind where the Banshees used to be.

No one could get through, but before anyone could move, the Silent Death ships split into two flanks. They parted to fly around the Colossus line…and vanished into thin air.

Clifton traced every inch of the battle searching for them, but Silent Death was gone. Akkek vaulted on high to observe her handiwork. DeWalt burst out of one exploding Colossus and hopped to the next. He leapfrogged down the line, popping them one after the other.

Far in the distance, a black shadow swelled out of Oibus’ canyons and chasms. Clifton’s blood ran cold as it crawled across the planet. It began on the night side and inched into the sun creeping closer to the station.

The Colossuses had their hands full with Akkek and DeWalt. They didn’t notice until it was too late. The shadow swallowed the station until Datrium blasts and gunfire dissolved in darkness.

DeWalt smashed through the last three Colossuses and rocketed out the other side. There was nothing left of the Regiment force in the skies over the lifeless rock that was Oibus.

The fringe ships floated nearer, but there was nothing left to do.

Clifton suffered a terrible moment of doubt. What if Eckhart really was down there? What if Silent Death accidentally killed him without meaning to?

That wasn't possible. Chyke was the one who told the alien force that Eckhart was gone. How did the Regiment move him so fast?

The now-familiar voice came instantly. *Eckhart is not on Oibus anymore.*

Where is he? Clifton couldn't tell his own thoughts from all the thoughts of the whole rest of the fringe army.

Chyke hesitated and everyone on the bridge went very still and quiet. They must be waiting to hear from Chyke, too.

I don't know where he is. There is something masking his location.

"How is that even possible?" Alice said out loud.

I'm sorry. I would tell you if I knew.

Alice shook herself and took a fresh grip on the regulators. "Call the alien fleet back, Rixby. We're done here. We're done completely until we can find out where Eckhart is."

She steered the *Marathon* back toward Churata. Akkek and DeWalt soared away from Oibus heading back to the *Marathon*. Clifton turned to the door. He wanted to talk to DeWalt about his powers and how they came back so suddenly when the smugglers threatened them on the *Vagrex*.

The *Vagrex* was still downstairs in the hold. What should Clifton do with it? Did it belong to the Regiment after all?

He took his eyes off the tactical grid for a fraction of a second and a devastating slam stuck the *Marathon*. The impact sent Dallas, Clifton, and Bing stumbling into the railing behind Alice's chair.

Clifton pushed himself up. "What the hell was that?"

"The whole ship is powering down!" Alia yelled from the other side. "We're going down on Oibus!"

"That's bullshit!" Alice bellowed. "We still have full power."

"I can't explain it." Alia attacked her controls, pressing every button in sight. "Nothing is responding. The engines are still operating at full power, but they aren't functioning. All systems are shutting down."

"Well, bring them back online now!" Alice went to work on the regulators, but it was no good. The *Marathon* revolved slowly in space.

Akkek and DeWalt glided closer, and at the moment when they should have disintegrated through the hull to rejoin their friends,

the whole world went dark.

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8

“What happened?” Rixby squeaked.

“I’m sorry, Ma’am!” a young Nalzai technician replied from the forward scanner station. “There was no shot, but the *Marathon* is stricken.”

“What do you mean by ‘stricken’?” Rixby demanded. “Bring the *Marathon* in now.”

“We can’t, Ma’am,” the technician told her. “The ship is totally without power.”

Rixby grabbed the helm on the *Atera*’s podium. She didn’t want to bring in another pilot so she taught herself how to pilot the ship.

She steered toward the *Marathon*, but in a second, the *Atera* bounced off an invisible barrier. “What is that?”

“I can’t identify it, Ma’am! It doesn’t match any known space phenomenon.”

Rixby backed the *Atera* off and tried reaching the *Marathon* from another angle, but no matter where she went, the unseen blockage surrounded the *Marathon* on all sides.

“I’m tracking the energy signature, Ma’am,” the scanner operator informed Rixby. “It’s spherical.”

“That doesn’t do us any good. Find a way to break it.”

The technician scrambled to work her controls. “I’m trying, Ma’am.”

Rixby turned to Squids who stood next to the podium. “Bring Namol and Vuldak in for a meeting, and get hold of whoever is taking charge of the Immortals.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” he replied.

“The *Marathon*’s orbit is degrading, Ma’am,” the Nalzai reported.

Rixby redoubled her efforts to save the ship when a deafening crash rocked the *Atera*. Two flashes of identical light flooded the bridge, and DeWalt and Akkek both crashed down on the floor right in front of the podium.

Rixby squealed in surprise and hopped off the podium. She waddled down the steps to DeWalt’s side, but Squids got there first. “What happened, DeWalt?”

DeWalt rotated onto his knees panting hard through bared teeth.

His sweat-damp hair hung over wild eyes searching everywhere. “They…they did it…they finally did it.”

Akkek retched, twitched onto her side, and burst into tears. DeWalt crawled over to her and put his arms around her. DeWalt’s features contorted in misery and despair.

“What?” Squids husked. “What did they do?”

DeWalt gulped and pressed Akkek’s head into his chest. She was crying too hard to speak. “The Regiment…they took our power. Permanently, this time. We’re finished. We can’t do anything.”

Rixby’s heart sank. She couldn’t think of anything to say.

“The *Marathon*,” Squids began.

“We can’t help you.” DeWalt pushed himself off the floor and picked up Akkek. She almost doubled over in agony, and DeWalt started leading her off the bridge. “I’m sorry, Rixby, but it’s all over for us. We’re just normal people now.”

Rixby let them go and then turned to Squids. “This is a disaster.”

“How did the Regiment do it?” Squids murmured. “No one has been able to do that except Akkek and DeWalt.”

“Where are the other Akeix—the ones Akkek transferred her power to?”

“They’re all on the *Atera*’s crew deck, where they were before. Eckhart ordered them to stay on the *Atera* and leave the fighting to the fringe aliens.”

Just then, the Nalzai scanner operator called out again. “Ma’am! The field is gone! We can reach the *Marathon* now. I’m pulling the ship into a more stable orbit.”

“Hail the *Marathon*.”

A different technician, a Monope, spoke up from the communications station to Rixby’s right. “I’m hailing the *Marathon*, Ma’am. There’s no answer.”

“There has to be. The crew was just on the ship. They didn’t just disappear.” Rixby clambered back onto her podium and punched the controls.

Squids came to her side. He took one look at her instruments, but he didn’t say anything. There wasn’t a single life sign left on the *Marathon*.

Rixby shook off mounting dread. “Bring the *Marathon* onto the landing platform.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

Rixby hopped down again. “You come with me, Squids.”

They both stepped into the elevator and the doors shut. “What can possibly have happened?” Squids whispered. “How did they just vanish?”

“Not so fast. We don’t know they’re really gone. Something could have gone wrong with the scans. Whatever stopped us from reaching the ship might have interfered.”

Rixby cringed when Squids didn’t reply. Her own words sounded hollow. Something had happened out there—something serious.

Something blocked the *Atera* from reaching the *Marathon* at the same time that DeWalt and Akkek lost their power. Something sent Akkek and DeWalt back to the *Atera*, and now everyone on the *Marathon* was gone.

She stepped out onto the landing platform. The *Marathon* sat in its usual place, except that its landing gear wasn’t extended. The ship slumped on its belly, but it was perfectly intact.

A few mechanics came forward and opened the hatch for her, but she already knew what she would find inside. No sound came from the deserted ship.

She climbed up into the cargo hold and stopped there. She didn’t have to search the *Marathon*. No one was here.

“What do you want to do?” Squids husked.

“There’s nothing to do. They’re gone.” Rixby turned away. “Come up to the medical bay with me. I need to question Akkek and DeWalt.”

Even those words disappeared into a well of silence too vast and terrible to stand. Rixby fidgeted on the way upstairs. What was the point of running the most powerful criminal organization on the fringes if she couldn’t even protect her own friends?

The *Marathon* crew had to be somewhere. The Regiment must have taken them somewhere—probably to another station. The Regiment wouldn’t take the *Marathon* crew at all if the authorities only planned to kill them.

She entered the medical bay to find Akkek sitting up. Her eyes were still red and swimming, but at least she seemed to be pulling herself together.

DeWalt stood at her side, and they stopped talking when Rixby and Squids showed up. “How are you, Akkek?” Rixby asked.

Akkek nodded and tears started streaming down her cheeks again. “I’m okay. I’m just…sorry about this.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” DeWalt interrupted. “I keep telling you

that. You couldn't have done anything. It's thanks to you we were able to knock out Oibus the way we did."

"Do either of you have any idea what happened?" Rixby asked.

"I wish I could say we did," DeWalt replied. "One minute, we were fighting the Regiment. I finished off the Colossuses, and Akkek took care of the Banshees. We were on our way over to the *Marathon* when it happened. We both got sent back to the *Atera*. You know everything we do."

"This makes no sense," Akkek exclaimed. "No one has been able to do this except the two of us."

"Unless we aren't the only ones," DeWalt pointed out.

"What are you saying?" Rixby asked. "Who would do this?"

DeWalt shrugged. "We had these powers because of Regiment experiments. We were both infected with whatever substance the Regiment was working on to create these super-warriors. It only makes sense that they created more than just two."

"Don't joke about that!" Akkek cried. "That would be terrible."

"I'm just saying. I did it to you and you did it to me. If there isn't any other force in the galaxy that can do it, the Regiment must have some other super-warriors with the same powers. That seems pretty obvious. They attacked us somehow and knocked out both of us at the same time." DeWalt turned to Rixby. "I don't see any other possible force that could deactivate the *Marathon*, steal its crew, and send us back to the *Atera* all in a split second. Do you?"

Rixby sighed. "I don't want to think about that right now. If there's nothing medically wrong with you two, I'd appreciate it if you could come upstairs with me."

"What for?" Akkek asked. "We can't do anything."

"You're the closest thing I have to the *Marathon* crew—my crew. I need you two with me when I meet with the other gang leaders."

"We'll do what we can," DeWalt replied, "as long as you understand that we're nobodies. Akkek is some kind of fringe hero, but I'm nobody. Even Clifton would be better than me."

"Clifton isn't here. You are. Now come on. I'm going to the crew deck to get the rest of the Akeix. I expect whatever this is took their power, too, but they're all we have."

The four of them got back in the elevator. No one spoke on the way down to the crew deck.

Rixby didn't like this one bit. First she'd lost Eckhart and now this. The people she depended on every day for years were dropping

like flies. DeWalt was the only person who even came close.

Rixby almost regretted taking command of Eckhart's new organization. She only persisted because its power gave her access to all the resources she needed to bring her people back.

Alice. Dallas. Bing. Eckhart. They were all gone. Even Clifton and Innyria were gone, and she had no idea where they were or how to find them. None of her vast knowledge helped her at all.

She never would have depended on an Earthling other than Eckhart, but now she was grateful to have DeWalt with her.

The party headed to the lounge, where the Akeix had been spending the battle. Rixby held her breath to see if they were powerless, too, but when she walked into the lounge, the world dropped out from under her feet.

The four Akeix were dead.

They sprawled on couches, and Miklon still held a bottle of solime juice in one hand. The slushy substance oozed out of the overturned bottle onto the couch at his side.

Akkek let out a heartbroken sob and collapsed on her knees sobbing. DeWalt put his arm around her shoulders, but no one said anything. There was nothing to say.

Rixby, Squids, DeWalt, and Akkek stared into the lounge and bottomless black terror gripped Rixby's heart. What if she couldn't stop this?

What if the whole rebellion fell apart on her watch? What if all of Aistenz Trotaer's power and resource couldn't stop whatever was causing this? What if the Regiment won?

Whatever was doing this knew about the *Atera*. It knew about the *Marathon*. Whoever did this knew the decision-making power behind the rebellion centered on these two ships. How did they know? How did the Regiment find out?

Rixby waddled back to the elevator, thinking fast. She had to do something. She didn't know what, but she had to fix this. She couldn't let the Regiment win, and she sure as hell wouldn't let them steal her friends.

Eckhart. This all revolved around Eckhart.

She made her way back up to the bridge. She planned to run through the Regiment records for any clue about Eckhart's location, but when she got there, she found Namol and Vuldak waiting for her.

Two Buku were with them, and they both wore Immortals

uniforms. Rixby scanned them up and down with her antennae. “You must be here to replace Rory Vagill and Dickat Norheall.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” the first Buku rumbled. “You’ll have no cause to question our loyalty.”

“I’m glad to hear it, because I have a mission for you.”

“Why them?” Namol interrupted. “Give us a chance to prove our loyalty to Eckhart, too.”

“I meant all of you, Namol. Come into the conference room. I want to talk to all of you.”

The four gang leaders entered after her and Squids, DeWalt, and Akkek turned up a moment later.

Rixby climbed onto the table and confronted the two Bukus at their eye level. “What are your names?”

“I’m Nals and this is Aerleth,” the first one replied.

“Where do you boys come from?”

Nals threw back his shoulders. “I come from the Phavu volcanic range.”

“And I come from the Dhairi slums,” Aerleth added. “Both of us have seen enough action.”

“I’m sure you have. Now listen to me. I need you to—”

“Excuse me, Ma’am!” The Nalzai technician called through the intercom from the bridge. “There’s another Regiment transmission coming in.”

The controls flickered on at the other end of the table, and Rixby gasped when she saw Admiral Keating and Eckhart again.

Eckhart looked even worse than before, and Admiral Keating smirked even more smugly. “You thought you could defy us, but you found out you were wrong. Now you’ll suffer the consequences.”

Rixby pounced on the controls and killed the audio feed. “Trace that transmission!” she called to the bridge. “Find out where it’s coming from.”

“It’s coming from Dhairi Station, Ma’am.”

Rixby whipped around and stared at Aerleth. This was too good to be true, but Admiral Keating cut her excitement short. “I warned you that Eckhart would die if you made any further moves against the Regiment. You violated those conditions and now you’ll pay the price.”

Admiral Keating stepped aside. A bunch of Regiment soldiers grabbed Eckhart and shoved him toward the camera. His wrists

were tied behind his back and his head and face were so bruised and swollen that he didn't seem to know where he was.

The soldiers yanked him into position on a raised platform with a trapdoor beneath his feet. They pulled a steel cable down from above the camera and cinched it tight around Eckhart's neck.

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9

Clifton squatted down next to Alice. “Are you okay?”

“Of course I’m not okay,” she spat. “Do I look okay?”

Innyria pulled away the bloody rag from Alice’s head, looked at it, and pressed it back to the gash on the side of her face. It made her look even more ferocious than usual, and that was saying something.

Clifton strode to the bars blocking off this cell. “I wish I knew where Bing was.”

“I don’t give a shit where Bing is,” Alice snarled. “Give me Dallas any day of the week.”

“Where do you think they took the Iaweis—and the Sataads?” Innyria asked. “I hope they’re all right.”

“We wouldn’t be able to do anything for them even if we knew where they were.” Alice knocked Innyria’s hand away. “Leave me alone.”

He didn’t react—not the way Clifton expected. Innyria sat down next to Alice, leaned his back against the stone wall next to her, and tossed the rag into her lap. He never responded to her outbursts of bad temper. In fact, he barely seemed to be aware of them at all.

Clifton marveled at the relationship between Innyria and Alice, but he didn’t have time to worry about that before a deafening slam startled everyone.

He spun around and stared as four Regiment soldiers barged down the aisle outside Clifton’s cell. They half-dragged, half-carried a stupefied Eckhart between them.

Two soldiers lugged him by the arms. The other two soldiers carried his legs for a while and then dropped them. The first two soldiers dragged him before the other two decided to pick up his legs and carry him a little further.

Another cluster of soldiers held Bing at gunpoint. They followed Eckhart’s group to the cell across the aisle from Clifton. They unlocked the bars, pitched Eckhart and Bing into it, and locked them in.

Clifton gripped the bars praying Bing would tell him something promising about Eckhart’s condition, but Clifton couldn’t see Bing

in the shadows.

Bing rolled Eckhart onto his back, and darkness swallowed both of them near the cell's back corner.

"Bing!" Clifton whispered after the soldiers left. "How bad is it?"

No one answered, and Clifton heard Bing cursing out of sight. "It doesn't matter if he's alive or dead," Alice snarled. "If the Regiment did *this*, they can defeat the whole fringe army."

"Are you saying the Regiment can defeat Silent Death?" Innyria shook his head. "I'll never believe that."

"How do you explain us coming here, then?" she fired back. "No one could accomplish that."

"Akkek could have," Innyria replied.

She snarled something about idiots her breath, but Clifton wasn't listening. He strained his ears to hear something across the aisle.

As soon as the soldiers appeared, more prisoners exploded in noise all the way down the aisle. They banged the bars and hooted and whooped in wordless bellows and screeches. Clifton couldn't see any reason for it except to raise a ruckus.

The other prisoners quieted down after the soldiers left, but it took a while. Clifton waited for silence before he tried again. "Bing!"

"Shut up!" Bing fired back. "Can't you see I'm trying to work here?"

Clifton waited for what seemed like an eternity, but neither Bing nor Eckhart appeared or made a sound. "Bing?" Clifton ventured. "Are you still there?"

Bing didn't answer at all this time, but a moment later, he slouched into view helping Eckhart. Bing moved Eckhart over to the wall and helped him sit against it.

Bing said something to Eckhart and Eckhart opened his mouth. Bing spat a large dollop of Eplite onto Eckhart's tongue and Eckhart swallowed it. He was still alive, and he'd be all right as long as he had Bing with him.

"How you doing, Eckhart?" Clifton asked.

Eckhart turned his face toward the aisle, and Clifton's stomach turned when he saw the state of Eckhart's head. The Regiment must have done one hell of a number on Eckhart if he looked like this after receiving Bing's treatment.

"I'm okay," Eckhart rasped between broken lips. No part of his

face functioned the way it should, and Clifton couldn't even tell if Eckhart could see. "I'm great since they decided not to hang me."

"Hang you!" Innyria interrupted. "What do you mean?"

Eckhart chuckled and ended up coughing. "I guess I'm still too valuable as a coercion tool against the fringes. Rixby thinks I'm behind executed."

Clifton glanced over at Bing for some explanation, but Bing only stared down at Eckhart. Clifton couldn't read the Yakit's expression.

"So how do we get out of here?" Innyria asked.

"We don't, asshole," Alice spat. "First they kill Eckhart and then they get rid of us. That's how it works."

"We can't just give up. What do you say, Eckhart? There has to be a way out of here."

Eckhart faced front. His features didn't change, but his body relaxed. "I don't know any way out of here, and I'm not in any condition to think about it. Why don't you ask Alice about that?"

"I just did," Innyria replied.

Bing finally turned his attention to his friends across the aisle and noticed the gash on Alice's face. Bing couldn't reach her, though. "Where's Dallas? He was with us on the *Marathon*."

"No one knows where he is," Alice growled. "Maybe they took him off to be salvaged for scrap."

"That isn't funny," Bing countered.

"Do I look like I'm joking around?" she fired back. "Of course they wouldn't put him down here with us. He's too strong. They wouldn't want him helping us escape. Use your brain."

"How did they get hold of you, anyway?" Eckhart asked. "How did they capture you? Is the *Marathon* a field of space junk floating in the atmosphere now? Remind me not to give you any more ships, Alice."

"The *Marathon* is just fine," she muttered. "It was perfectly intact when we left it."

"There's no guarantee that it still is, though," Innyria added. "The Regiment might have blown it up after we left."

"They couldn't blow it up with Akkek and DeWalt guarding the fleet," Bing ventured.

"Are you really that stupid?" Alice cut in. "The Regiment captured us right under Akkek and DeWalt's noses. Akkek and DeWalt couldn't do anything to stop it, and now we're here. Quit living in a fairy tale, Bing. Akkek and DeWalt can't do jack shit to

get us out of here."

Bing's eyes rotated over to meet Clifton's, and they both looked away. Clifton didn't want to think about being trapped in a Regiment prison on the prisoner side of the bars, but he couldn't argue with Alice's bleak outlook.

"How *did* we get here?" Innyria asked no one in particular.

"Don't you know?" Eckhart asked.

"No idea," Clifton replied. "We just…appeared here."

Eckhart cocked his head to one side and winced. "That's weird."

"What was that you were saying about them hanging you?" Innyria asked.

Eckhart shrugged and coughed again. "They're trying to mess with Rixby. They made it look like they were going to hang me. Then they brought me back here."

"If she thinks they hanged you, she must think you're dead," Bing replied.

"Not quite. They cut the feed before they actually showed me falling through the trapdoor."

Everyone stared at him in shock. Clifton felt sick to his stomach.

Eckhart forced a laugh. "Don't worry. They didn't do it. I'm still alive."

Those words startled Bing, and he gave Eckhart another dose of Eplite. Some of the swelling in Eckhart's face appeared to be going down, but that could have been the dim light playing tricks on Clifton's eyes.

Bing finally sat down next to Eckhart, so his condition couldn't be too serious. "I guess we might as well get comfortable. We aren't going anywhere for a while."

Eckhart started to say something, but a sudden hissing sound cut him off. Clifton turned around. Alice sat in the same place, but instead of complaining about their situation, she turned her hollow eye sockets on the walls around her.

"What is it?" Innyria asked. "What do you see?"

"They're disintegrated!" Alice croaked. "They're in the walls. They're watching and listening from inside the walls!"

"Who is?" Eckhart asked.

"I don't know, but they're definitely there. They keep moving around from cell to cell. They're concentrating on us because we're the newest arrivals. They're listening to our conversation."

"Disintegrated…like Akkek?" Clifton asked.

“Of course like Akkek,” Alice fired back. “She developed those powers in a Regiment lab. The Regiment perfected the virus or whatever it was on her. They did it years before they ever thought of using DeWalt.”

“If that’s true…” Clifton broke off.

“Are you saying there are more Akkeks running around here?” Innyria frowned at the wall, but there was nothing to see.

“They aren’t Akkeks because they’re male,” Alice returned, “and they aren’t running around.”

“Shit!” Bing groaned. “This is bad.”

“They aren’t a danger to us as long as we’re in here,” Alice told him. “They’re just watching us.”

“That explains how we got here,” Innyria replied. “They disintegrated us out of the ship and brought us here.”

Before anyone could say anything else, the same soldiers came back. They came to Clifton’s cell instead of Eckhart’s, and they unlocked the bars right in front of him. “You!” one of them snapped. “Come with us.”

“Me?” Clifton glanced behind him at the other two. “Why me?”

“How should I know? Admiral Keating wants to talk to you.”

Clifton started to protest, but the soldiers only grabbed him and yanked him out of the cell. His four friends watched the soldiers march him away.

Clifton didn’t fight them. Some part of his brain still deluded itself that he might be able to help them somehow—as if someone might be able to reason with Admiral Keating.

The soldiers led Clifton up several flights of stairs, down a few corridors, and eventually pushed him into an office.

Both admirals stood by a large wooden desk, and they turned to face Clifton when he entered. Admiral Keating wrinkled his nose in a way that Clifton recognized only too well. It was the usual expression of disgust most Earthlings used when dealing with anything alien.

Admiral Ferris studied something on the instruments in front of him. “You’re Captain Blake Clifton, retired.”

Clifton straightened up to confront these two men. “That’s right.”

“You were working for Eckhart when we spoke the other day,” Admiral Keating added.

Clifton pursed his lips. “Did you bring me here to tell me things

I already know?"

"We brought you here to offer you a compromise."

"You mean a chance to bitch out on my friends? Thanks," Clifton replied, "but I'm not interested."

Admiral Keating only smiled. "I see you haven't lost your Regiment attitude. That's good to see, Captain. We can work with that."

"I'm not a captain anymore. I'm your enemy."

"I don't think so." Admiral Ferris turned his display around so Clifton could see it. "The aliens you call friends are prisoners here. Those that are still at large on the fringes will be dead soon…unless you decide to help us."

"I will never help you," Clifton countered. "You plan to kill billions of aliens. You poisoned DeWalt and God knows how many other people with your experiments. You're evil."

"We might be evil, but you'll still help us." Admiral Keating did something on his display. It showed Clifton both cells: one with Alice and Innyria, the other holding Bing and Eckhart. "You're the only person who can keep them alive, Clifton."

"Don't forget your friend Dallas Eldridge." Admiral Ferris made another adjustment to the feed.

The screen showed Clifton a picture of some lab somewhere. Dallas stood in the center hooked up to a million wires. A bunch of technicians in white coats worked on every part of him.

"Would you really stand by and watch us kill them all?" Admiral Keating asked. "You could save them, Clifton. All you have to do is help us."

"You're human," Admiral Ferris went on. "You can still come back to Earth restored to your old position. You don't have to go down in flames with these aliens. You can still choose to do the right thing."

"Eckhart is human, too," Clifton pointed out. "Are you offering him the same option?"

"Eckhart will die. He has to be executed as an example before the fringe aliens. They have to see that we would even kill one of our own to win this war. They have to understand that we would retaliate so much more harshly against any alien who took his place."

Clifton flashed back to what DeWalt said on Churata. If the Regiment killed Eckhart, the aliens would only react by attacking.

Eckhart's death would galvanize the fringe aliens and bring them together to seek revenge.

Then Clifton remembered what Eckhart had just said. The Regiment made it look like they'd already executed Eckhart. They put on some show to screw with Rixby so the aliens would think Eckhart was being hanged. Was this another trick to mess with Clifton's head?

Admiral Ferris answered Clifton's thoughts for him. "You wouldn't want anything to happen to your friend DeWalt, either. You're his bodyguard. It would be terrible if you turned out to be the cause of his death."

"What about him?" Clifton asked. "He isn't here."

Admiral Keating smirked even more triumphantly. "You're thinking about his immense powers—the powers he got from us. His powers no longer exist. We implanted a shutoff switch in all our experimental assets, and we shut down DeWalt when he turned against the Regiment. He's powerless now."

"We also implanted a remote kill device," Admiral Ferris added. "We can shut off his life the same way we shut down his powers. We can kill him at a moment's notice if we choose."

"You can save him, Clifton," Admiral Keating went on. "All you have to do is cooperate."

"You can tell us everything about the aliens who took over the rebellion after Eckhart's capture. You can tell us their plans and you can explain their dispositions. You've been with them long enough. You know them better than we do."

Clifton opened his mouth to tell them where they could shove their cooperation, but at that moment, the display in front of him revealed the same soldiers trooping into the prison. They went to Eckhart's cell, opened it up, pushed Bing out of the way, and wrestled Eckhart out into the aisle again.

Clifton's stomach dropped. Were they going to kill Eckhart right now? Was this another manipulation?

What could Clifton tell these men that they didn't already know? Telling them about Rixby wouldn't help them fight the aliens. Whatever Clifton knew about Rixby's plans would have gone down the crapper after the *Marathon* crew disappeared.

Telling them whatever meager scraps of insight Clifton could give them…wouldn't that be worth his friends' lives? Clifton had risked a lot to keep DeWalt alive. Could he really turn his back on

the *Marathon* crew, now that he had a chance to save them?

He might be able to save Alice, Innyria, Bing, Dallas, and DeWalt. Clifton would never be able to save Eckhart. Not all the information and cooperation in the world could accomplish that.

The two admirals didn't have to tell him so in so many words. Eckhart represented the rebellion, and everyone knew it on both sides of the war.

The Regiment wouldn't be playing these deadly games with Eckhart's life if they didn't understand loud and clear what Eckhart meant to everyone on the other side. They had to kill him. It was only a question of when.

"I can see you have a lot to think about," Admiral Keating mused. "You can go back to your friends. We'll give you twelve hours to make up your mind."

Clifton hardly noticed when the soldiers led him back to the cells. His conscience told him never to compromise with the Regiment. He'd be tainting himself for all time if he made a deal with his enemies.

How could he turn it down, though? How could he live with himself if he didn't do everything possible to save their lives?

The soldiers pushed him into the cell and the bars clanged shut in Clifton's face, but he hardly heard them. He only half-heard Bing ask, "What was that all about?"

"They probably gave him a home-cooked meal and a bubble bath," Alice snarled. "Earthlings love their Earthling buddies."

Innyria laughed, and amazingly, so did Eckhart. He still sat in the same place where Bing had put him. So the admirals had tricked Clifton by showing him the guards taking Eckhart away.

"What did they want, Clifton?" Eckhart asked. "Let me guess. They want you to switch sides and sell out the fringes by telling them everything you know."

Clifton jolted alert. How did he think Eckhart wouldn't know?

"They did, didn't they?" Innyria muttered. "The bastards!"

Clifton shrugged, but he couldn't look at anyone. "They say they'll kill all three of you…and Dallas…and DeWalt. They say they implanted a kill switch in DeWalt and they can kill him remotely."

"Did they show you Dallas?" Bing asked. "Is he here?"

"I guess so. They have him in a lab. It looks like they're studying him."

"Tell me you aren't actually considering this," Alice hissed. "Tell

me they didn't wring your precious little heart with their hollow threats."

"How do you know their threats are hollow?" Bing asked. "We don't mean anything to the Regiment. They could kill us all."

"I swear I never met anyone as cowardly as you, Bing," she snarled. "You'd cave to any threat, no matter how small."

"Watching the five of you die is hardly a small threat," Clifton choked.

Alice snorted. "You're as bad as Bing over there. They'll kill all of us anyway. Do you honestly think they'll make good on their promise to spare us once you give them whatever information you give them? You're a patsy, Clifton. You always were."

"You should do it," Eckhart chimed in. "You should take this deal."

Clifton spun around with a gasp. "You are *not* serious!"

"I am. You should do it."

"Dear God, Eckhart!" Alice grumbled. "Not you, too!"

"You should take it, but not because you want to keep all of us alive. That's impossible. You should take it so they take you out of here."

"Are you insane?" Clifton fired back. "I'm not helping them! What's the point of waging a war against them if I'm going to cooperate with them?"

"You might want to watch your mouths." Alice nodded toward the nearest wall. "Those things are listening."

"What difference does it make?" Eckhart replied. "The admirals would be stupid to believe Clifton suddenly changed sides. They'll already suspect him of duplicity."

"I am *not* cooperating with them," Clifton announced. "Forget it."

"Tell them whatever they want to know," Eckhart went on. "It won't help them against the aliens."

"They shut down DeWalt and Akkek," Clifton told him. "They're both powerless. The Regiment has more of these experimental assets. Alice has seen them. The fringes don't stand a chance against them. The whole rebellion is finished."

Eckhart only shrugged. "I choose to hold a more optimistic view of our chances."

"That's because you're a fool, Eckhart," Alice growled. "You're a dreamer."

Eckhart turned his puffy eyes on Clifton, and now Clifton knew with no doubt that Eckhart could see him. Eckhart looked right at him. “Do it, Clifton. What you tell them and how much you cooperate with them won’t make any difference, but it will do one thing that will help the rebellion.”

“What’s that?” Bing asked.

“You’ll be outside these cells. The admirals will keep you upstairs with them. That will give us one man free to help us when the shit goes down.”

“The shit will go down, all right,” Alice muttered. “It will go down when they execute us all.”

Clifton turned away. He couldn’t stand Eckhart looking at him like that. Clifton ran his fingers through his hair. His mouth said, “I need to think about this,” but his heart said otherwise.

Clifton already knew what he would do, because Eckhart told him to. Who the hell was this man?

Even with his face smashed to a pulp, even sitting in a Regiment cell with a death sentence hanging over his head—even in the darkest times, Eckhart could command anyone. If Eckhart told Alice and Innyria to fight back, they would do it without question.

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10

Several lab technicians revolved around Dallas, hooking things up to his prosthetics. They retreated to their computers, ran various energy currents through his systems, and discussed the results.

One of the younger men propped Dallas' arm prosthetic on a raised shelf while the guy studied Dallas' Datrium aperture. The technician's nametag read, *Jacob Short*. It was the perfect name for the twerp.

Short kept up a steady stream of questions while he worked. "How does this work? How does your system store Datrium to use as a power source?"

"I have a reservoir under my chest plate," Dallas replied. "It feeds power to all my systems. I don't really understand exactly how it works."

"So your joints are electrical?" Short asked. "How can they be if they run on plasma?"

"I told you I don't know. I didn't study them before they were installed and I *couldn't* study them after they were installed."

Short didn't seem to hear, or maybe he just didn't accept that Dallas was telling the truth. "Which parts of your body are still organic?"

"I wouldn't know," Dallas muttered. "You would have to ask Platanistoidea Havilm."

Short's head shot up and his eyes popped. "Platanistoidea Havilm?"

"That's who manufactured and installed my prosthetics." Dallas frowned at the young man. "You know who Platanistoidea Havilm is, don't you?"

Short gulped and bent over the aperture. "Everyone knows who he is."

"Would you like me to contact him so you can direct your questions to him? I'm sure he'd be happy to answer anything—"

"No!" Short cried. "I don't want to talk to Platanistoidea Havilm. Are you insane?"

"Why not? He's a nice guy—very approachable. I'm sure he'd be delighted to—"

“No!” Short screamed and immediately looked over his shoulder at the other technicians working on the computer equipment across the lab. Short lowered his voice to a whisper. “Don’t mention Platanistoidea Havilm again, okay?”

Dallas savored watching the kid squirm. “Why not? He saved my life.”

“He’s one of the most notorious gangsters on the fringes!” Short breathed. “Do you have any idea how dangerous he is? He’s one of the top ten most wanted fugitives on the Regiment’s hit list.”

“I know he is.”

“He’s unscrupulous!” Short whispered. “He’ll dissect anyone and he experiments by plugging them up to machines and running tests on their nervous responses.”

Dallas looked around at all the wires connected to his own armor. “Isn’t that what you’re doing?”

Short turned bright red. “This is different.”

“Why—because you belong to the Regiment? I’ve met Platanistoidea Havilm, son. I know him a lot better than the Regiment does. He never experimented on anyone in his life. He charges way too much to ever do anything to anyone against their will. The guy has a twenty-year waiting list. He has people lining up around the fringes to pay for his services.”

Short shot Dallas a look and bowed his head again while he tinkered with the aperture. “How did you pay for all this, then?”

“That’s none of your business.”

Short changed the subject by frowning at the aperture. He’d been poking it with a screwdriver and accomplishing nothing.

Short refused to look at Dallas’ helmet. Dallas apparently made the young man so uncomfortable that Short didn’t even try to look at him.

Short bent close to Dallas’ massive chest plate. “How does this detach?”

“No idea.”

“Come on,” Short chided. “Give me a clue.”

“I’m telling you the truth, kid. I don’t make a habit of dismantling myself.”

Short blushed. “I meant…don’t your friends have to take you apart to...you know, repair you if you malfunction?”

“I never malfunction.”

Short stared at Dallas in terror. “Never?”

“Nope. Maybe the Regiment should hire Platanistoidea Havilm to fit out their super-warriors instead of pumping them full of viruses and chemicals and whatever else.”

Short located a single screw between Dallas’ chest plate and his shoulder rotator joint. “This must be it.”

Short jammed his screwdriver into the screw and started puffing and panting trying to turn it. He gasped and sweated, but the screwdriver kept slipping out of the slot. “Dang! It’s really in there, isn’t it?”

“Why are you doing this, Jacob?” Dallas asked. “What can you possibly hope to accomplish by taking me apart?”

Short shot another furtive glance behind him. “I have to. I’m under orders. That’s the only reason.”

“Why did you join the Regiment?”

Short blanched and leaned even closer to Dallas’ shoulder. “I didn’t, okay?” he whispered. “I graduated from school and went to work for a food processing lab. The whole lab got commandeered by the Regiment two years ago. All of us had our lives wiped out. I haven’t seen my family or my wife since then…and she was four months pregnant when the Regiment took us away. I didn’t ask for this, okay?”

Dallas fell silent. He relaxed and didn’t interrupt Short’s futile efforts to unscrew that one screw. Dallas could think of a lot of things he’d like to do to help this young man, but none of them seemed very practical right now.

Dallas had planned to soften the kid up and hopefully ply Short for information about the rest of the *Marathon* crew. Now Dallas gave that up, too, after the story Short just told him. The kid had much bigger problems to deal with.

Dallas turned his helmet one way and then the other. His optical lens picked up a lot more about this underground fortress than the Regiment probably wanted him to see. They obviously didn’t design this place to hide anything from scanners as powerful as his.

He picked up energy fluctuations in the walls, ceiling, and floor that had nothing to do with the lab equipment the technicians were using on him. Dallas hadn’t seen anything like it, except in one place—two, actually.

Indistinct shapes that might be people vaporized through walls, hovered near the technicians, and then vanished into nothing. They disintegrated in and out of the lab watching, listening, and going off

somewhere else.

Dallas took advantage of the lull to consider his position. Sure, he could tear these wires off and start shooting. The technicians still hadn't come anywhere near finding his Datrium reservoir, much less draining it.

He could blast this place apart, kill everyone in the room, and storm through the fortress to find the *Marathon* crew. He would probably find Eckhart in here somewhere, too.

Dallas didn't do that, though. If the Regiment had other assets like Akkek and DeWalt, they'd kill Dallas before he got out of the lab. No doubt that was why they kept hanging around—to defend the lab techs if they needed it.

He had to choose his battles, and he couldn't win this one. The technicians would have to make a lot more progress toward dismantling him before he risked that. If he stayed put long enough, he might find a way to rescue the others.

He tried to ignore Short's continuing efforts to take off his chest plate. None of the screws responded to Short's muscle power, so Dallas turned his attention to the other technicians.

They kept adjusting the frequency of power they sent through his systems. They kept using mostly electrical currents that his Datrium channels barely registered. The currents gave Dallas a tickling sensation—nothing more.

He used his scanners to pick up as much information about the different technicians as he could, but after he got through three of them, the lab door opened.

Admiral Keating came in and observed from the computer station for a while. He studied Dallas with an expression of false interest on his face.

Dallas instantly recognized the appraising flick of the admiral's eyes over Dallas' armor. Dallas knew that look only too well. Plenty of aliens measured Dallas like that when they were thinking about stripping him and selling his parts for scrap on the black market.

The admiral finally stepped up to Dallas' pedestal and positioned himself in front of Dallas. Short beat it and vanished out of sight.

Dallas' helmet adjusted the facial recognition points of Admiral Keating's skull and brought up the man's service record.

The Regiment's records didn't list anything out of the ordinary—nothing that anyone would connect with any experimental labs or alien rebellions or holding alien leaders hostage. In fact, Admiral

Keating's record listed his current location as the Regiment General Staff Post at Taetov Station on Europa. These Regiment assholes really knew how to cover their tracks so no one found out what they were doing.

The admiral surveyed Dallas with interest, but it wasn't the benign scientific interest the admiral probably hoped he was communicating. His eyes lit up now that he could see Dallas' armor in more detail.

The admiral eventually broke the silence and got around to saying what he came here to say. "You're Dallas Eldridge. You held the rank of major in the Regiment before you went AWOL."

"Actually, I still hold the rank of major." Dallas did a quick check on the Regiment's personnel roster just to make sure. "I'm still listed on active duty."

Admiral Keating strolled around the pedestal where Dallas stood. The admiral's pupils dilated when he studied Dallas' prosthetics. "How did you get these robotics? How do they work?"

"You already know where I got them," Dallas murmured. "You have the records from Kukuri. Don't kiss my ass asking friendly questions. Just cut to the chase and tell me what you want."

Admiral Keating smiled and lowered his eyelids. "You're an astute man, Dallas. You must realize—"

"I realize you're going to try to either bribe or threaten me to turn against the fringe aliens, so save your breath. There isn't anything you could possibly offer me to cooperate with you."

"Not even Eckhart's life? Would that be a price worth your cooperation?"

Dallas made his decision instantly. "No, it wouldn't. You're going to kill Eckhart anyway. If you don't free me, you'll have to kill me, too—but I warn you I will fight back. I'll take out as many of you as I can before I'm finished."

Admiral Keating only smiled. "I thought you valued Eckhart more than that. I'm surprised. You're more mercenary than I thought."

Dallas didn't take the bait. This man was playing him. "What I think of Eckhart is none of your business. Now, if you have something else to say, you better say it and leave me alone. I'm busy here."

Admiral Keating laughed out loud. "All right. I'll make you a deal. You turn over all the records from your cerebral archive,

including everything related to the alien fleet right up until you left the *Marathon*. You include personnel data, movements, weapons systems—everything."

"Is that all?"

"Not quite. You also turn over all your schematics and you let my technicians make copies of your operating system and scan your prosthetics so we can reproduce them."

Dallas laughed. "In exchange for what? What do I get in return?"

"You get to live." Admiral Keating waved behind him at nothing. "You must have seen our assets floating around. If you refuse, they'll disintegrate you. They'll take all that information by force and you'll be dead."

He didn't answer. Admiral Keating could have taken all that information by force the minute he captured Dallas. So why was Dallas standing here being sweated on by Jacob Short?

"Your friend Clifton is already working for us. He's already telling us all about Aistenz Trotaer's fleet and the attack on Oibus Station. He's told us all about Chyke and Silent Death killing Rory Vagill and the other Immortals leaders."

Dallas still didn't respond. Admiral Keating didn't learn about all that from Clifton. He'd bet any amount of money on that.

Why would Clifton sell out the *Marathon* crew like that? Had Admiral Keating threatened Clifton, too?

Threatening Clifton's life wouldn't make Clifton cave. Clifton had many faults, but cowardice wasn't one of them.

Dallas could think of a threat that *would* compel Clifton to cough up information to the Regiment. Admiral Keating must have threatened the rest of the *Marathon* crew, too.

"Do we have a deal, Dallas?" Admiral Keating asked.

Dallas sighed. "All right. I'll do it."

Admiral Keating burst into a huge grin—a genuine one this time. "Wonderful. The technicians will start downloading your archives now."

The admiral walked out of the lab, but not without giving instructions to the technicians. Short came back and hooked up another series of wires to Dallas' helmet.

Dallas started transmitting his cerebral archives to the Regiment computers, starting with the earliest.

He started with the very first sensory logs he recorded after

Platanistoidea Havilm woke him from stasis. This could take hours or even days. That gave him time to think.

Dallas knew the Regiment too well to expect Admiral Keating to honor his promise. He would destroy Dallas as soon as he got what he wanted—which begged the same question. If the Regiment's experimental assets could take this information whenever they wanted, why make a deal with Dallas at all?

Short's eyes widened staring down at Dallas' helmet, like Short wanted to ask some more questions, but he didn't speak. Dallas stared straight ahead. He needed to come up with a plan. He had to find the *Marathon* crew and get them out of here, but how?

He turned his attention back to the walls. The assets kept migrating in and out of the lab, but they didn't interest him.

If Dallas could only extend his periscope, he could scan through these walls. Then maybe he would be able to find the *Marathon* crew. He could scan for Bion life signs, or Yakit life signs.

He made another snap decision, and the next time Short came over, Dallas said, "I like you, kid. I want to do something nice for you."

Short's face drained of all color and he turned white as chalk. "You don't have to do that."

"I want to. I want to do you a favor because I like you."

Short's eyes widened even more. "You do?"

"I'm going to show you something—something these idiots wouldn't find if they studied me for a thousand years."

"But…wouldn't they find out when they read your schematics?"

"I'm going to show them to you. Admiral Keating and everybody else will know that I like you because I showed you first. Are you ready?"

Short gulped.

Dallas opened the flap in his helmet and his periscope rose out of his head. It rotated back and forth scanning the lab.

"Whoa!" Short whispered. "That's awesome!"

Dallas didn't answer. He rotated the periscope from left to right and scanned the surrounding structure. He was right. His sensors looked right through the walls.

He spotted Eckhart, Bing, Alice, and Innyria locked up in a prison cell underground. They were three floors below the lab and about fifty yards away.

Dallas didn't see Clifton anywhere, but that only made sense.

This fortress was crawling with Earthlings. Dallas' sensors couldn't tell one from another, but that didn't matter. At least Dallas knew where his friends were. He knew exactly where he needed to go when the time came to free them.

Now he just had to figure out how to destroy the assets standing in his way. That was going to be much, much more difficult.

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11

Rixby stared at the image in front of her and her insides twisted. Eckhart's smashed face contorted when the trapdoor dropped beneath his feet. The cable zipped tight around his neck and his neck snapped to one side as his weight fell against it.

"No!" Akkek shrieked, but Rixby couldn't move. She couldn't be seeing this. Eckhart couldn't be dead.

"You will die for this, you bastards!" Namol snarled through gritted teeth.

Rixby whirled away and hopped off the table. She hustled back to the *Atera*'s bridge and clambered onto the podium. "Rally the whole force to Dhairi Station—full speed!"

"We're going!" Namol sprinted for the elevator. "We'll rendezvous with you there!"

Rixby didn't turn around. She seized the helm and drove the ship to its fastest pace. "Arm all fighter squadrons! Akkek, DeWalt—get down to the landing platform and take charge of the squadrons."

We're already at Dhairi Station, Rixby. Rixby froze when she heard Chyke's voice. *Eckhart is still alive. The Regiment showed you a doctored image to make you think he was dead. The whole* Marathon *crew is on Dhairi station.*

Rixby took the space of half a second to recover. "Full assault! Bring the whole alien force to the station. Show no mercy!"

A thousand ships launched with Eckhart's fleet. Rixby made sure the rest of the *Atera*'s sister ships kept up, and in seconds, the whole fringe army hurtled in a massive crowd toward Dhairi Station.

The station occupied a remote solar system between the outer fringes and Earth. Several layers of Regiment defenses protected it from alien attack, but that only fed Rixby's thirst for revenge.

The *Atera, Eotera, Sitera*, and *Kestera* led the charge, with all the gangs arrayed behind them. Dozens of Regiment Colossuses and Stormbreakers stood guard between the Dhairi system and the next remotest system. They formed a blockade to protect territory nearer to Earth.

Silent Death—attack! Rixby thought, and a flock of unmanned

ships rocketed past the *Atera* on a collision course with the Stormbreakers.

The Stormbreakers rotated their guns to lay into Silent Death. The ships whizzed in clouds around the Stormbreakers and attracted all their fire.

"Get around behind them!" Rixby ordered. "Get past the line and get down on the station."

"Squadrons Two and Five away!" Squids announced from across the bridge.

Rixby didn't care. She slammed the *Atera* to full speed and skated between the Stormbreakers, who were completely surrounded by Silent Death ships.

She dove the *Atera* for Dhairi Station with only one thought in her head: revenge. The Jackal Clan and the Chosen hung close on the *Atera*'s tail, but when they got within striking distance of the station, a fleet of Regiment ships came out to meet them.

"Immortals—break off!" she ordered. "Wheel to starboard and attack the station while we hold them here."

"With pleasure," Nals replied.

The Immortals broke ranks. The Regiment tried to adjust its advance to counter both flanks, and Rixby saw her chance.

She gunned the *Atera* straight into their midst and opened up with every gun blazing. The squadrons plunged in and occupied the smaller ships with the *Atera*, and its sister ships took on the Colossuses.

The Stormbreakers tried to fight Silent Death and help out the Regiment fleet at the same time, but Silent Death attacked even more ferociously. Hundreds of dark ships surrounded the giant weapons stations. The *Atera*'s sensors no longer picked up any light or power coming from the Stormbreakers.

More Silent Death craft swarmed in. They clustered on the Stormbreakers' hulls, and one of the Stormbreakers exploded in a glorious rain of combusting Datrium.

The explosion blasted Silent Death away, too, but a second later, all that debris floated to a standstill, reformed into ships, and rocketed in for another assault.

Rixby wheeled the *Atera* to starboard once again. The Regiment couldn't break through the Immortals' line. The path to the station was all clear.

"Scan the surface for Bion, Yakit, and Urus life signs," Rixby

ordered.

"I found them!" the young scanner operator replied. "They're in a deep underground fortress. There's also an AI down there that matches Dallas Eldridge's signature."

"Feed the defenses to my podium."

At that moment, a blazing starburst of blinding light erupted off the planet's surface. It soared into black space, lighting up the whole battle.

It vaulted high into the stars and hung suspended there for all the world to see. A dark outline in the center gave a perfect shadow of a tall, sturdy man.

"No!" Akkek shrieked down the communications system. "You bastard!"

She yanked her fighter around and punched the throttle, shooting straight for the guy. Her squadron pilots started to follow her.

"Break off, Squadron Five!" DeWalt yelled from the other side of the battle. "Fall back and rejoin Squadron Two!"

Akkek kept roaring in mindless rage, rushing straight for the bright halo flashing and gleaming in the heavens. Rixby's readings showed the fighter's engines spiking into the danger zone.

"Akkek!" DeWalt yelled. "Akkek—*No*!"

She didn't hear him. She plunged for the halo and opened up all her guns. She bombarded the bubble of light, but the guy inside didn't react. He just watched her coming from the safety of his energy ball.

"Akkek!" Rixby called. "Break off, Squadron Leader Five! Pull back, Akkek!"

"You bastard!" she yelled again. "I'll kill you!"

DeWalt screamed one more time. "Akkek!" but Akkek didn't answer. Her fighter dove straight into the halo, and a sudden flash of brilliance blinked across the battle. Akkek was gone.

Rixby groaned, but this was only the beginning of the disaster. As soon as Akkek's fighter disappeared, the guy's halo erupted in thousands of lasers spurting all over the battle. They sliced through ships' hulls. They detonated engines and sent the fringe vessels spinning out of control.

Explosions dotted the battlefield and lasers stuttered on the *Atera*'s hull. "Triorium drive!" Rixby ordered. "Get our defenses up and target that—that thing!"

“Triorium drive activated!” Squids reported. “We’re swallowing his lasers, but he can still hit us.”

“*Kestera*—engage with him while we make another run for the station.”

The *Kestera* swooped in on the guy. Rixby couldn’t see any distinguishing features inside his halo. Who was this guy? He had all Akkek’s power and then some.

The *Kestera* didn’t make the same mistake Akkek did. The ship held off taking thousands of lasers on its hull, but the Triorium field protected the ship.

Triorium ejections bombarded the guy’s fiery ring, but nothing penetrated it. The *Kestera* couldn’t make any headway against this enemy.

Rixby took her chance and drove the *Atera* past him toward Dhairi Station. The *Marathon* crew was down there somewhere.

She fired on the station, but with her very first shot, four more blazing sunbursts shot off the planet. One of the smashed into the *Atera* on a dead race for the battle.

Silent Death peeled away from the Stormbreakers. Only five Stormbreakers remained intact, and none of them fired anymore. They showed no energy signatures or life signs at all. Silent Death had completely annihilated them.

The Silent Death ships zoomed away from the lifeless hulks and rocketed for the five strangers burning in the night sky. The strangers floated to a stop in formation with their friend, and Silent Death surrounded them.

The five strangers erupted in spherical laser blasts that would have flattened any other adversary, but their lasers didn’t touch Silent Death. The lasers shot straight through the Silent Death ships.

Silent Death crept nearer. All those ships flowed like a black river through space and surrounded the five strangers. Silent Death inched closer and the strangers unloaded faster and more continuously.

All their lasers vanished into the black wave and Silent Death closed to finish them off. “Now, Squadron Two!” Rixby ordered. “Bring your fighters around for a bombing run on the station while we cut our way into the fortress.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” DeWalt pulled his squadron around and raced past the strangers to dive for the station.

Rixby punched the *Atera*’s throttle. The ship’s Triorium ejections

bombarded the station when the five strangers broke formation. They rushed Silent Death and all five of their brilliant halos burst in showers of sparks.

Thousands of pinpricks blew through the Silent Death ranks and scattered in the stars. Their brightness started to fade in the blackness…and then the tiny dots regrouped and reformed into shadowy people.

The strangers reassembled behind the alien attack force and all five hovered there without moving. They turned back, and Rixby felt sick when she saw what happened to Silent Death.

The strangers vaporized through all the dark Silent Death ships and they shattered en masse. They scattered in darkness and they did not reform.

Millions of black specks dissipated into space as though all those ships were never there. They vanished, and they didn't come back.

"What the hell just happened?" Squids choked.

Rixby gulped. *Chyke?*

No one answered. Chyke had promised that he would always listen and he would always answer for Silent Death. If he was gone…

Rixby turned her attention back to the station. The *Atera* was too close to Dhairi to retreat now. She couldn't retreat with those five strangers standing guard. They blocked any path off the planet.

She hardened her resolve and faced the station itself. DeWalt's squadron veered over the surface and started the first bombing run. It was now or never.

Rixby blocked the five strangers out of her mind and unloaded Triorium ejections on the station. She targeted the control room, the sentry crossing, the Datrium cisterns, the barracks, and the landing zone. She bombarded every sensitive spot she could remember from every other attack the alien fringes made against the Regiment.

The rest of Eckhart's fleet joined in. The *Atera* hit the Datrium cistern and it blasted into the night sky with a satisfying boom. Rixby unloaded on fifty Colossuses preparing to launch.

At that moment, one of the experimental assets dove from on high and smashed into the *Atera* from above. It hit the Triorium defenses. They protected the ship to stop the asset from disintegrating through the hull, but the impact pounded the ship into the ground with impossible force.

The blow flung Rixby off her podium. Squids tried to pick her up, but the asset kept slamming the *Atera* down again and again. Screams echoed all over the bridge.

“He’s going after our engines!” someone yelled from behind. “If he succeeds, he’ll knock out the Triorium drive!”

“Target him with everything we have!” Rixby ordered. “Locate our people. How deep underground are they?”

“I can’t tell!” the young scanner operator replied. “The asset is blocking our sensors.”

“Find them!” Rixby shrieked. “We aren’t leaving without them.”

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12

Clifton bent over a chart of the Tictus system and pointed to the most heavily populated planet. “This is Aistenz Trotaer’s headquarters. It’s where he keeps his ground army.”

“How trained are they?” Admiral Ferris asked.

“I wouldn’t know,” Clifton replied. “They’re aliens under Aistenz’s command, so I would imagine they aren’t very well trained at all. You saw what they did on Guzion. They’re a mob. They’re rabble.”

“Dallas Eldridge was commanding them on Guzion.” Admiral Keating studied some files on his computer. “They followed him well enough.”

“That’s what I’m saying,” Clifton replied. “They followed him, but they didn’t have any leader as powerful as him before Guzion. They never needed one.”

“You don’t know that,” Admiral Keating argued. “We don’t know what kind of leadership they had before Dallas took over.”

“Do your records show any incident of Aistenz Trotaer’s ground troops attacking any Regiment station?” Clifton asked. “Do your records show any incident of Aistenz Trotaer’s ground troops attacking anyone—anyone at all—even another gang?”

Both admirals turned away. Neither of them would look at him. “No,” Admiral Ferris muttered. “We don’t.”

“Aistenz ruled by intimidation and guile. He kept that army to deter his enemies, and it worked. There are no records of him using an army that size against anyone. He never needed to. Eckhart deployed them for the first time against Oiwei Station and then against Guzion. They have no other combat experience.”

Admiral Keating pursed his lips and frowned at the chart of Tictus. It showed dozens of ships and thousands of alien life signs just waiting around for the word to attack some Regiment installation, but Clifton didn’t point this out.

In the time since these two morons had taken him out of the cells, they’d been plying him for as much information as possible about Eckhart’s forces and the aliens in general. Whenever Clifton told them what he knew, the two admirals didn’t believe him or just

plain dismissed his information.

Clifton didn't press the point. He still smelled a rat with this whole information deal. He wasn't telling them anything about Eckhart's forces that the Regiment didn't already know. These two dopes could see everything on the chart, without any help from Clifton.

What did they think they were doing? Did they think Clifton would get so attached to being around Earthlings that he would forget all about the Regiment's plan to wipe out the fringe aliens? The two admirals sure acted like that was the extent of their genius plan.

Admiral Keating switched the chart to something else. Clifton took a second to realize it was a ground plan from Black Mountain, the Lion Tribe headquarters where Eckhart had rescued him.

"What defenses did the Lion Tribe have on this hollow built into the wall?" Admiral Ferris asked.

Clifton frowned at the plan and then at the admiral. "What are you asking me for? I wasn't involved in breaking the Lion Tribe's defenses."

"But you were there. How did Eckhart get inside the Lion Tribe's defenses?"

"How should I know? I was out of my mind at the time. I was locked up inside the wall, and the next minute, Eckhart was there with Dallas and—"

"Dallas was there?" Admiral Ferris demanded.

"Of course he was. So were Alice and Innyria."

Admiral Keating waved that away. "We won't be getting information from any aliens. They aren't reliable enough."

Clifton snorted. "You're an idiot."

"Tell us what you remember about the aliens that transported you from Pheste to Rulara."

Clifton groaned and covered his eyes. "We've already been over this a thousand times."

"Tell us again," Admiral Ferris prompted.

Clifton took a deep breath, but before he could say anything, a dull thud trembled the walls and ceiling over his head. "What was that?"

"The alien horde is attacking. There's nothing to worry about. Our assets will handle them. Now tell us how the Lion Tribe put you inside the wall and then—"

Another blow struck the fortress and Clifton froze. The alien fleet was outside. They were assaulting Dhairi Station. They were trying to rescue the *Marathon* crew.

Clifton's nerves stood on end. This was the moment he'd been waiting for, the moment for which Eckhart had told him to cut this deal in the first place.

He had to help free his friends. He had to find a way to neutralize the Regiment's assets so the *Atera* could get down on the surface. Then Clifton had to find a way to get Eckhart and the others to the ship.

Clifton thought fast. He'd been scheming about how to break free ever since Eckhart came up with this plan. Now Clifton had to put his plan into action.

He fought down rising nerves. He was going against the whole damn Regiment and he probably wouldn't survive, but that didn't matter. Only the *Marathon* crew mattered. Eckhart mattered.

Clifton bent over the desk and pointed to a spot on the ground plan. "Do you see that passage there? That's where the wall was. The passage leads from this cross-corridor to this underground hangar..."

Admiral Ferris swiveled around the desk to stand next to Admiral Keating. The two men peered down at the thin lines Clifton indicated.

Time stood still and Clifton's heart stopped. He'd never attacked anyone in the Regiment before—not like this. He'd helped the fringe aliens plan their rebellion. He'd even fired weapons in fights since he met the *Marathon* crew.

He would have done a lot worse to help Eckhart's cause, but he never personally attacked a Regiment officer—not like this. He never looked someone he knew well in the eye knowing he was about to do something that would probably get them killed.

The moment crystallized in his being. He had one shot at this, and if he hesitated, he wouldn't get another chance.

This was his one opportunity to strike a blow for the fringes…or he could strike a blow for the Regiment. The choice was his and no one would ever see or know enough to blame him for it either way.

Admiral Keating looked up and met Clifton's eye. "So…what about the passage? What are you telling us?"

Clifton snapped out of his trance and moved his finger along the chart line. "This passage…it leads to an underground catacomb

where Dallas wiped out the last of the...”

He reacted too fast to give himself a chance to think twice. He thrust his hands under the display and yanked against the two power cables feeding into the device. He ripped them out with one tug, whipped them on top of the deck, and crammed both severed ends into the two admirals’ necks.

They both convulsed as devastating streams of Datrium flowed into their nervous systems. They jerked and twitched in front of Clifton’s eyes, but he didn’t let up, not even when Admiral Keating’s dazed eyes locked on Clifton.

The admiral’s lips peeled back from his teeth and he snarled with the muscle contractions tearing him apart. Clifton savored the moment of sadistic triumph until something snapped behind Admiral Ferris’s back. Clifton pulled the cables back, and both admirals collapsed on the floor behind the desk. Had he killed them both? He must have. And now he had to move.

He raced out of the office and down the hall. The first thing Admiral Keating did after Clifton made his deal was to have his people serve Clifton a huge meal, let him take a shower, and give him clean clothes.

Clifton’s brief stint down the fortress halls showed him just enough of the place to give Clifton the advantage he needed.

He dove into another room and pulled open the weapons locker tucked behind Admiral Keating’s office. The Regiment soldiers were always coming and going from here, restocking their ammunition, and exchanging weapons when they went off shift.

Clifton loaded himself with every weapon he could lay his hands on. Alice, Innyria, and Bing would want pounders. Clifton took sidearms for himself and Eckhart—and then he spotted a whole stack of Halfanite blocks on the floor.

Clifton scrambled around and found a backpack. He packed Halfanite blocks and primers, along with as much ammunition as he dared to take.

He couldn’t wait any longer. He rushed out of the room and almost got trampled by soldiers trooping down the corridor. They took one look at him, swung their weapons to their shoulders, and opened fire without even calling a warning.

Clifton ran the only way left to him. He sprinted back into the room and almost got his ass handed to him when the soldiers rotated into the doorway and showered the room with plasma.

He took a running leap straight ahead, tucked his head, and dove headfirst through the window to the ground dozens of yards below.

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13

Dallas cocked his head to one side, but he said nothing. His helmet picked up Triorium fluctuations in the bedrock around the lab. Only two groups used Triorium drive—the Jackal Clan and Aistenz Trotaer's fleet.

Short came back over to Dallas' side and started tinkering with the wires attached to Dallas' helmet. The data feed from Dallas' cerebral archive to the Regiment records had progressed up to his early days with Eckhart on the *Marathon*.

Bing wasn't on the crew back there. It was just Eckhart, Dallas, Alice, and Rixby. How simple and straightforward those times seemed in retrospect.

Short did something, and the feed cut off. "Oh. Sorry," he mumbled. "That wasn't supposed to happen."

"Where is your family, Jacob?" Dallas asked.

Short looked up. "Huh?"

"Your wife and kid. Where are they? Are they back on Earth?"

"No, they aren't on Earth. They're on the Mars Research Station—at least, they were when I last saw them. I don't know if they're still there, but that's where I was when I got recruited into this lab."

"Two years is a long time to go without seeing your family," Dallas remarked.

Short colored and looked away. He pretended to concentrate on reattaching the wires.

"Would you like to do a more detailed study on my periscope, Jacob?" Dallas asked. "Once you restart the feed, you won't have anything else to do but wait while it downloads. Why don't you get your scanners? You can take readings on my periscope's function. What do you say?"

Short's eyes widened and he stared straight at Dallas' optical lens. Short was learning, and Dallas picked up signs of excitement and even attachment signals coming from the young technician. "Uh…okay. Thanks."

"Go get your scanners. You'll need to stand behind me. Once you're ready, I'll extend my periscope. You'll be able to see it better from there."

Short bustled off somewhere and Dallas put the young man out of his mind. Dallas had to get out of this lab. The time had come, and he didn't want the Regiment downloading any more records from his cerebral archive. They had enough.

Dallas only cared about one thing. He couldn't let Short get caught in the crossfire. This kid was as much the Regiment's prisoner as the *Marathon* crew.

Dallas stayed unnaturally still and scanned the surrounding walls. The five experimental assets vanished as soon as the shooting started. They must be out there fighting the fringe aliens, which didn't bode well for Dallas' friends.

Now the lab was undefended, and Dallas could make his move. He just had to get Short out of the way.

Short came back and set up his scanning devices at Dallas' elbow. Short adjusted the data feed wires again and then took his position behind Dallas' back.

Dallas' scanners measured the position and constitution of every other member of the lab staff. None of them was armed. They wouldn't offer any resistance.

"I'm ready," Short prompted.

Dallas swung his arms up and slotted out his Gatling guns. He opened up, slicing plasma all over the lab. He stormed off the pedestal, tore all the wires off his armor, and overturned the scanners that Short had so meticulously set up.

Short dove for cover and all the other lab techs screamed. Dallas aimed his shots for the walls behind their heads so he didn't hit any of them—not that he cared much about hitting them, but he'd rather not take the chance. They were probably all conscripts like Short.

Dallas shattered every wall and blasted all their computer equipment to smithereens. He carved a path to the door, barged into the corridor, and looked back just to make sure.

Short gaped at him from behind his scanners. He stared at Dallas in stark terror, but at least the kid would make it out of this alive. He might even make it home.

Dallas turned his guns on the lab door and destroyed the walls surrounding the entrance. Plaster, rock, and broken mortar rained into a giant heap, blockading the technicians inside.

Dallas had barely finished that project when gunshots ricocheted down the hall from his left. He turned to face two squads of

Regiment soldiers firing at him from doorways up the hall. Their shots pinged and deflected off Dallas' armor and did no damage.

Dallas trooped up there spraying Datrium everywhere, but he hardly looked at the soldiers and he definitely didn't target them. He blasted the walls to pieces and made them retreat before him.

He scanned the surrounding fortress for any sign of his friends, and eventually extended his periscope to locate Eckhart and the others.

Dallas encountered three more groups of soldiers on his way down to the prison, but they didn't offer much resistance. None of them had any weapons that could harm him, not even when the last one brought out a huge laser cannon. The Regiment must have stolen it from some alien race.

He headed for the stairs and they rushed out to set the thing up in front of him. They aimed it at him and cowered behind it while he tromped closer by the second.

One guy sat down in a firing cradle behind the weapon, switched it on, and fired the laser down the hall. It hit Dallas' chest plate and he stopped walking.

The laser scattered in a million prismatic flashes, but his anionic elasticity quantatid kicked in and protected him.

The soldiers switched the laser off and stared at him over their cannon. Dallas studied them, waiting for their next move. None of them moved. They didn't discuss their strategy. They clearly never thought their laser wouldn't work.

Dallas swung up his Gatling guns and the crew scurried for cover. They left their laser sitting there while the whole group dove back into the stairwell.

Dallas opened up and the laser exploded in a cloud of blue smoke. Parts bounced off the walls and then the stairwell fell unnaturally quiet.

Dallas listened. More booms and blasts resounded through the fortress from outside. He had to act fast.

He burst into the stairwell and descended to the prison. He located the level where the *Marathon* crew was being held, but he only saw one human life sign in there. Was it Clifton or Eckhart? Dallas didn't want to leave anyone behind, but he might have to if things turned against him.

He forced the door leading to the cells. He stepped out into the open and another shower of gunfire peppered his armor. He rotated

his guns around to tear the attacker a new asshole when someone charged out of the mayhem and ran straight into him.

Clifton bounced off Dallas' bulk and toppled to the floor in a mountain of so many weapons it was a miracle he could run at all. Blood streamed down Clifton's face and soaked his shirt.

"What the hell are you doing?" Dallas demanded.

More gunfire cut him off. Soldiers positioned themselves farther up the corridor and fired on the two men. The soldiers must have been chasing Clifton.

Dallas took one step and straddled Clifton's fallen body. Dallas fired into the walls and ceiling again until mountains of stone and chiseled blocks separated him from the soldiers. That would slow them down.

Dallas peered down at Clifton. Clifton's heart raced and he panted for breath. His wild eyes skipped around looking everywhere, for invisible enemies. Dallas wouldn't get a straight answer out of this man.

Dallas hauled Clifton to his feet, but Clifton still took way too long gathering all his weapons. He had more guns than the whole *Marathon* crew could possibly use in their lifetimes.

Dallas couldn't wait anymore. He stormed down the aisle until he came to Eckhart's cell. "You look like shit, Eckhart."

Eckhart tried to grin and winced. "Thanks, pal. A compliment from you means a lot."

"Stand back." Dallas aimed his Gatling gun at the bars. "The fleet is attacking the planet."

"I picked up Triorium fluctuations in the bedrock," Alice replied when Dallas broke her cell open.

The *Marathon* crew rushed Clifton and unburdened him of his goods. "How do we get out of here?" Eckhart asked.

"Follow me."

Dallas headed back the way he came, but Clifton stopped him. "No! We can't go that way. It's crawling with soldiers."

"And?" Dallas asked. "I can handle them."

Clifton shook his head. "There's a better way down here." He pointed behind him.

"There is no way down there. That passage ends beyond the laundry." Dallas tilted his helmet to one side and scanned the way Clifton indicated. "We would be trapped down there."

"That's what you think," Clifton argued. "You didn't see the

charts—the updated charts in Admiral Keating's office."

"We can't go both directions," Eckhart decided. "If Clifton knows a way that *isn't* crawling with soldiers, we should try that first."

"I don't care which way we go as long as we go now." Alice pivoted backward and leveled her pounder as more soldiers charged into the aisle.

Alice, Bing, and Innyria fell in line to bombard the prison with plasma. Dallas positioned himself behind them as Clifton and Eckhart bolted between the cells.

Dallas made sure the two men got away, and then he and the others backed off. He read less Triorium coming from the surface. Was the battle turning against the aliens?

The three friends held the soldiers at bay while Clifton and Eckhart vanished into the laundry. Dallas stood guard until Alice, Innyria, and Bing reached him. Then Dallas opened fire and covered them while his three friends darted to safety.

Dallas defended the door and made sure the soldiers didn't come near the laundry entrance. He extended his periscope and kept an eye on the *Marathon* crew's retreat. He rained hell on the soldiers who cowered at the other end of the prison.

Clifton led Eckhart to the far end of the laundry. They dodged washing machines and steam presses…and then they kept going. Dallas' scans of the fortress showed the two men running through solid rock. Clifton must have been right.

Then Dallas noticed another posse of soldiers moving in from another direction. Dallas' scans didn't reveal any passage or corridor there, either. This group traveled through solid rock, too, and they gained on the fugitives by the second.

Dallas fired another torturous barrage at the soldiers and broke his position. He took off through the laundry on an intercept course, but his scanners kept playing tricks on him.

Alice, Innyria, and Bing entered the same passage, catching up with Clifton and Eckhart. Dallas picked up speed, but he was too far away. He cursed himself for letting them get so far ahead.

He burst through a steam cloud and overtook Alice and Bing. "Did you send them your sweetest Valentine?" Bing teased.

"I gave them the dinner date of their lives." Dallas rotated his periscope the other way. A second squad of soldiers was advancing on Clifton and Eckhart from another direction. The two groups

would cut off the fugitives' path any second now.

All at once, Clifton and Eckhart stopped. They halted in one position with both groups of soldiers converging. Dallas sped up again. "Clifton and Eckhart are in trouble!"

He rounded another corner….and stopped. He checked his position against his scanners. Clifton and Eckhart should have been right in front of him, but Dallas couldn't see anything. His scanners showed him and the *Marathon* crew embedded inside the planet.

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14

Clifton ducked behind a huge stone cube and ripped open the backpack he was wearing.

"What are we doing here?" Eckhart asked.

"Someone's coming!" Clifton whispered. "The soldiers found us."

"How?" Eckhart stared down into the backpack. It was loaded to the gills with Halfanite blocks. Clifton started working fast to prime them and fit them with timers. "Where the hell did you get all this?"

"The same place I got this." Clifton stretched out his wrist and showed Eckhart something strapped to his arm like a watch. "The Regiment has been experimenting with all kinds of stuff while no one was looking. Too bad Admiral Keating is too interested in rubbing everyone's nose in how smart he is—or I should say, he *was* too interested in rubbing everyone's nose in it."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Eckhart asked.

"Nothing. Forget it. Anyway, this thing shows me the life signs of everyone within range. There are some soldiers heading straight for us. I'm guessing they have these things, too."

"Shit!" Eckhart looked around, but he didn't see anything but bare rock walls cut into the planet. "How do we get out of here?"

"We don't. We lure them to us. They want to recapture you so they'll…" The thing on Clifton's arm buzzed. "Here they come."

Clifton fitted two Halfanite blocks to the cube next to his head and started the timer. He pulled Eckhart away, and Eckhart let Clifton lead him deeper into the tunnels.

Clifton stopped every few paces to set more Halfanite against the walls and at strategic locations. "What about the others?" Eckhart whispered. "They'll walk right into these."

"Dallas and Alice will be able to see them."

Eckhart studied his friend. How did Clifton know Dallas and Alice could see Halfanite?

Just then, a deafening boom shook the fortress and Clifton shot to his feet. "Run!"

Eckhart sprinted after him. They took off running down the tunnel, which became darker by the second. "Where are we going?"

Eckhart yelled.

"To the surface! We're nearly there."

Eckhart didn't argue. He didn't want to know how Clifton found out so much about this place.

"There it is!" Clifton slowed down to a walk. He turned a corner and approached an open breach that marked the end of the tunnel.

Eckhart inched up to his side, and both men looked out over Dhairi Station. Explosions dotted the nighttime landscape. Lights blazed all over the station, and Datrium plumes erupted from the ground guns.

They rocketed into the atmosphere, destroying ships all over the place. Four identical blazes of sun-bright energy zoomed through the alien fleet. Battleships exploded in their wake, and catastrophic coronas of lasers sprayed from their rims.

The tunnel opened on a hillside at the station's outer perimeter. Eckhart and Clifton looked right down onto the battle from a perfect vantage point. Eckhart's heart dropped when he saw the *Atera* down on the ground in the middle of the station.

One of the Regiment's experimental assets surrounded the ship in a blaze of glory. Distant crashes and the groans of tearing metal echoed all the way to Eckhart's ears.

"Damn it!" Clifton whispered.

Eckhart shot out of the tunnel. "Come on! We have to get down there!"

"You're crazy!" Clifton called after him. "They'll kill us!"

Eckhart didn't answer. He sure as hell wasn't going to stand around and watch these assholes destroy his ship—his whole fleet. He didn't come this far to give up on the rebellion at the first defeat.

He made a decision on the fly. He couldn't reach the *Atera*, so he headed for the station's big pounders instead.

Clifton ran up behind him. "What are you doing?"

"Throwing my life away! I'm good at that."

Clifton swore under his breath again, but he kept pace with Eckhart all the way. They charged down the mountain, but when they reached the bottom, a deafening explosion rocked the hillside behind them.

Eckhart ducked to protect his head from rubble and stone pelting down from above. He looked over his shoulder and stared as the whole mountain vaporized in a giant dust cloud. "I think you

used too much Halfanite, Clifton."

A second later, Dallas, Alice, Innyria, and Bing charged out of the crater. They ran for the *Atera* and the sight of them galvanized Eckhart's resolve.

He seized Clifton's sleeve and hauled his friend into a run. "Do you have any Halfanite left?"

"Three blocks."

"Prime them but don't set the timers."

Clifton muttered something else about Eckhart's sanity, but he started digging into his backpack anyway.

Eckhart measured the battle and had to dive behind a building when rockets whistled down from the sky. They blew near his hiding place, but they weren't aimed at him. None of the combatants was close enough to see him…were they?

He gauged the distance to the nearest ground gun. The giant pounder spat Datrium into the atmosphere, picking off alien vessels by the dozen. More guns dotted the station, but the assets did the most damage.

Eckhart pulled his weapon forward and braced himself for a fight. "What are you going to do?" Clifton shut his eyes and covered his face. "No, don't tell me. I don't want to know."

"Open your eyes, Clifton. You're coming with me and make sure you come out shooting. If things go wrong, you can blow the gun with your Halfanite."

Clifton screwed up his face and mimicked Eckhart in a high, sneering voice. "Make sure you come out shooting, Clifton." He changed back to his normal voice. "Why is it always 'come out shooting' with you? Can't you just get along with the other kids?"

Eckhart laughed. He was genuinely glad to have Clifton with him. He only hoped they might be able to make a difference in this battle.

He nodded to Clifton, and then Eckhart sprang out of his hiding place. He sprinted for the big gun, but the gunners manning it didn't see him. He dashed behind it, took cover behind a parked Regiment vehicle, and then swiveled out shooting.

He cut half the pounder crew while they were still hard at work. The others spun around to protect themselves, and Clifton finished them off from Eckhart's right.

Eckhart scrambled onto the gun with Clifton right next to him. "That's three Halfanite blocks saved," Eckhart panted. "Now for the

—”

He broke off when an explosion drew his attention to the *Atera*. The asset still surrounded the ship, but the *Atera* didn’t seem to be taking any more damage from the asset’s assault.

Triorium ejections cut through the asset’s halo. The *Atera*’s shots rocketed into the air and didn’t damage the asset, either. The ship and the asset remained locked in mortal combat, with neither able to defeat the other.

The asset threw off hundreds of lasers that zinged into the atmosphere. The guy could knock alien ships out of the sky without slackening his grip on the *Atera*.

Eckhart rotated the pounder toward the ship, but he didn’t fire. He didn’t want to hit the *Atera*.

At that moment, a different blaze of light sparked in the night. It flashed brilliant red a hundred yards from the ship. Lasers spat from the asset’s halo and bounced off Dallas’ armor.

He stalked across the landscape, heading for the *Atera*. The asset broke off assaulting the alien fleet and turned his fire on Dallas, but the asset’s lasers couldn’t penetrate Dallas’ defenses.

He leveled his Gatling guns at the asset, but Dallas’ blasts only bounced off the halo. Eckhart thought fast. He had to find a way to destroy this thing. Datrium wouldn’t do it. Triorium protected the *Atera* from being crushed, but it didn’t repel the asset.

“Man the gun, Clifton!” he yelled, and hopped off the seat.

Clifton shrieked, “Hey!” but Eckhart was already running away. He hopped to the ground and bolted for the *Atera*.

The asset didn’t notice him, so Eckhart pulled his weapon forward and fired at the thing several times.

He couldn’t think of this as a person. This wasn’t Akkek or DeWalt. It was some freakish experiment gone wrong.

Whoever the asset had been before, whatever poor sucker the Regiment used for this experiment—that person was long gone. This was an enemy, an enemy of the whole galaxy.

Eckhart’s attack worked, and the asset turned his lasers on him, but Eckhart didn’t stop running. He had to use himself to draw the asset away from the *Atera*. If he was right….

He kept up a steady barrage of shots until the gun in his hands ran out of Datrium. He threw the weapon away. He didn’t need it anymore.

Another explosion in the atmosphere lit up Dallas’ armor. Dallas

was only a few dozen yards away. Eckhart screamed to Dallas in his mind. Eckhart hoped and prayed Dallas understood what Eckhart was trying to do.

Eckhart couldn't wait a second longer. He dug his aching legs into the ground and dove for the asset in a flying tackle. He expected the halo to throw him off the way it threw away ships and every other kind of weapon.

Instead, Eckhart soared straight through it and collided with a human body. He flung his arms around a human man like himself. Eckhart caught a moment's glimpse of sandy red hair and bright green eyes. The guy had freckles.

The next second, they hit the ground and the field holding the *Atera* popped off the ship to surround Eckhart.

He tumbled the stranger head over heel. Eckhart flipped his enemy down on the ground, but Eckhart already felt his strength ebbing. The many beatings he'd taken in Regiment custody caught up with him, and his enemy overcame him in a heartbeat.

The asset wrenched Eckhart over and pinned him. The guy scrambled on top of Eckhart to hold him down, and then crushing pain tore Eckhart's insides out. He screamed in agony as a million tiny knives sliced and shredded and ripped him apart.

He writhed in torment. The asset leered down at him in sick triumph with the halo blazing all around both of them. Eckhart gave himself up for dead, but that didn't matter anymore. The *Atera* rose from the planet's surface behind the asset's back. The ship lifted away and left him behind.

Lasers erupted from the asset's halo, but Eckhart couldn't see where they went or what they hit. The halo shuddered a few times as powerful blasts hit it, but nothing stopped the inevitable devastation dismembering Eckhart from the inside out.

Akkek had been trying to tell him about this. Now Eckhart understood why Ilke looked so miserable while it was happening. He was being disintegrated one piece at a time.

The *Atera* levitated higher and started to get smaller. A peaceful feeling took over Eckhart's mind. The ship was out of danger and he could rest. The asset wouldn't be able to stop the ship without releasing him.

Without warning, Dallas' helmet stabbed inside the asset's halo. Dallas bent over and snatched the asset off Eckhart. The tearing sensation spiked off the charts for a second before it vanished

entirely.

Eckhart couldn't move. He lay flat on his back and tasted blood in his mouth. He couldn't get up. He could barely breathe, but he was never happier in his life because Dallas was here. Dallas stood over him, holding the asset by the back of the neck.

The asset struggled in Dallas' grip. Dallas swept his other arm around, aimed his Gatling gun at the guy's face at short range, and fired, but the shot went straight through the asset's head.

The asset disintegrated and dropped out of Dallas' hand. The guy landed on the ground, doubled over, and his halo blasted outward in an almighty blast of lasers, but Dallas reacted faster.

He sidestepped around the asset and planted himself between the asset and Eckhart. The lasers pinged off Dallas' armor and didn't damage him.

Dallas jerked up both Gatling guns and unloaded everything right into the guy's head. At the same instant, a giant fountain of Datrium seared across the landscape, coming from Clifton's pounder, and the *Atera* turned all its guns on the guy, too.

The blasts went straight through the guy, but the combined assault produced the desired effect. The guy shot into the air, soared high into the atmosphere, and rejoined the battle raging in space beyond Dhairi.

Dallas stood still with his back to Eckhart for a moment. Dallas tilted his helmet from side to side scanning the surroundings. He held the same position as Alice, Innyria, and Bing appeared out of the dark.

Eckhart became aware of people running around him, but Eckhart didn't recognize them. His brain was shutting down fast, and he teetered on the verge of unconsciousness. He couldn't stay awake anymore.

Bing bent over Eckhart and spat a wad of Eplite into Eckhart's mouth. Then Bing's many limbs wrapped around Eckhart and lifted him off the ground. The *Atera* descended and turned its open landing platform toward the *Marathon* crew.

"Clifton!" Dallas boomed. "Clifton, come on!"

Bing turned back and Eckhart saw Clifton crouching behind the pounder. He didn't emerge for a second, but then sprinted for the *Atera*.

Dallas rotated his Gatling guns back and forth until everyone got inside. Clifton reached the opening and a ground-shaking *ka-boom*

set a cataclysmic fireball billowing across the landscape.

Clifton staggered as the pounder exploded behind him. He would have gone down, but Dallas grabbed him and hauled him inside the ship.

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15

Rixby climbed onto an exam table and stared down at Eckhart lying on the next table. Alice, Dallas, Innyria, Bing, Clifton, DeWalt, Martin Staton, and Squids all stood around Eckhart's bed.

"How bad is the damage?" Rixby asked.

"This is the worst case I've ever dealt with," Bing told her. "We've done everything we can with the technology we have. Whether he survives or not is out of our hands."

"He attacked the asset with his bare hands," Clifton breathed. "The asset damaged his internal organs, but Eckhart was already injured before that. He did all that injured so the *Atera* and the rest of us could get away."

"He'd been like that since I first met him," Bing replied. "Taking charge of Aistenz's empire didn't change him. Nothing will ever change him."

"Well, we got him back the way we planned," Innyria remarked. "Now what do we do?"

"We can hardly call this a victory with Eckhart hanging onto life by a thread," Squids pointed out. "If someone doesn't take charge of this rebellion immediately, the fringes will break out in gang warfare while the leaders fight to establish who will take over."

"Is now the time to talk about that?" Dallas asked. "Eckhart isn't dead."

"Not yet," Clifton replied. "It only makes sense to establish the succession of power just in case."

"If someone else doesn't take over, Aistenz's old empire could completely dissolve," Squids went on. "Everyone who once held any loyalty for Aistenz and Eckhart could leave. They'll scatter to the corners of the galaxy and go do something else. They'll forget all about fighting the Regiment and everything will go back to the way it was before."

"What about it, Rixby?" Dallas asked. "You've been in charge this long. You could just keep going in Eckhart's place. Everyone believes in you."

Rixby glanced behind her. The other Yakit on the *Atera*'s medical team hung back to give the friends space. The medics did

their best to save Eckhart. There was nothing else anyone could do but wait.

The rest of Eckhart's empire held its breath to see if he would live or die. Namol, Vuldak, Nals, and Aerleth stood outside in the waiting area. The whole rebellion ground to a halt while everyone waited to see who exactly was going to take charge of this movement.

Rixby only covered for Eckhart as his proxy. She'd never planned to take over permanently. Could she really do that if he died? Would she be able to face it?

She might prefer to just disappear into the woodwork and forget all this. She didn't want to be a part of this movement without Eckhart.

She didn't have to look very far to know that her friends and former crew felt the same way. They all stared down at Eckhart with the same long faces. They were hardly even a crew without him.

Clifton brought her back to reality real quick. "Everything will go back to the way it was before, right up until the Regiment uses whatever asset it develops next or one it already has developed. It could send those assets after us any time, and we wouldn't be able to stop them. The Regiment won't let the fringes forget this. They'll hit back, and it won't go well for the fringes. If we're actually going to stop them from wiping out the alien population, we have to do it now."

"That thing tore him apart," Alice husked. "It tore him apart on the inside. It would have torn every one of his organs to shreds if Dallas didn't come at the right time."

"That thing," DeWalt interrupted, "was a person. *He* was a person. He probably has a family back on Earth."

"He isn't a person anymore," Alice snarled. "He's a fiend, and I'll kill him if I ever see him again."

"That's the problem. We can't kill him," Bing pointed out. "There are five of those things and we can't fight them."

"Eckhart fought them," Alice replied. "They can be killed. Akkek was killed—"

"She was killed by one of them," DeWalt replied. "We can't kill them with conventional weapons."

"We drove that asset off by attacking him," Dallas countered. "We might not have destroyed him, but we got Eckhart away from

him. That's something."

"None of this means anything if the whole rebellion falls apart," Squids argued. "This movement needs a leader. We've already seen what will happen without one. Eckhart got captured and the gangs were at each other's throats within days."

Dallas started to say something else, but Rixby cut him off. "You don't have to worry about the gangs. I'll deal with them."

Everyone turned around to stare at her. She didn't know where the words came from, but once she said them, she didn't want to take them back.

The Regiment had done a lot of terrible things since this whole business started, but this was the worst. They'd hurt Eckhart. They'd tricked Rixby into thinking he was dead. They'd made her watch what she thought at the time was Eckhart being hanged by a steel cable.

This moment crystallized her decision. She'd followed Eckhart for years. She supported him in this rebellion because she respected him and accepted his leadership. She admired him for taking up the cause of stopping the Regiment's plans.

All that changed now. His broken body lying barely alive in front of her did something to her that could never be undone. This was her fight in a way it wasn't before. Stopping the Regiment was her job now.

She hopped off the exam table and headed for the waiting area. The Yakit parted to let her through. "What are you going to do?" Bing asked.

"I'm going to stop them. I'm going to destroy those assets."

"How?" Dallas asked. "We don't have any weapon powerful enough."

"You don't worry about that. You leave that to me."

She sensed the others dropping farther behind her. They must realize that she was on the warpath now. She would be damned if anything got in her way, much less some freaks the Regiment cooked up in a lab.

She waddled out into the waiting area where the four gang leaders waited for her. They all glared down at her. "Well?" Namol demanded. "Is he alive?"

"He's alive," Rixby replied, "which means I'm still in charge as his proxy."

"How do we know you aren't lying?" Vuldak asked. "How do we

know Eckhart isn't dead and you're trying to take over without the authority to command this rebellion?"

"Let's assume for a second that Eckhart is dead and I'm taking charge in his place. Do you really want to challenge me, Vuldak? If you are, say so now because we can take care of that right here in the waiting area if you like."

Namol shot Vuldak a filthy look and Vuldak pulled his head in real quick.

"Now listen very carefully," she went on. "I have jobs for all of you. The Regiment thinks they have us on the ropes, which means we need to strike back right away. We can't let them think they've made us doubt."

"How can we?" Nals asked. "How can we fight those things?"

Rixby didn't have to ask what he meant. "Don't worry, Nals. You won't be fighting them. I want each of your gangs to rally as many ships and fighters as you can muster. I'm going to assign each of you to a different Regiment station. Namol, you'll take the Jackal Clan against Pion Station. Vuldak, the Chosen will attack Jonovich Station, and the Immortals will assault Beyama Station."

"What good will that do when even one of those things can take out our entire fleet?" Vuldak asked.

Rixby rounded on him and didn't even try to keep the scorn out of her tone. "The very next time you question my orders, Vuldak, I'll have you executed and I'll replace you with someone who knows how to do what they're told. I am not Eckhart, my friends. Eckhart is a soft touch who cares about his friends and former business associates. I am not. If you aren't prepared to do what is necessary to fight this war, you better step aside now and wear the brand of cowardice for the whole fringe population to see."

She let those words sink in, and this time, all three of the other gang lords shot Vuldak such hateful looks that he shut his mouth for good.

"Like I said," she went on, "none of you will be fighting the Regiment's assets. I will take the *Atera*, the *Sitera*, the *Kestera*, and the *Eotera* back to Dhairi. We'll engage with the assets there. That will leave the rest of you to act with impunity."

"So what do you want us to do with these stations?" Aerleth asked.

"Wipe them out. Wipe the floor with them. Raze them to the ground and don't leave a single Earthling alive."

Namol's eyes widened. "We can do that."

"Go on, then. Go gather your forces, but don't move on the stations until you get word from me. We all need to strike at the same time. If anyone strikes early, you'll blow the whole plan and almost certainly bring the assets down on your heads. Do you understand, Vuldak?"

Vuldak nodded down at the floor, but he didn't speak. Good. He was finally learning.

He and the two Immortals leaders filed out, but Namol remained behind. He stopped in front of Rixby and stared down at her with hard, unwavering eyes. "I'm glad it's you. I couldn't ask for better."

"Thank you, Namol. Thank you for your loyalty and commitment. I'm grateful."

He nodded and went out. Rixby waited until silence fell over the waiting area. That silence held the seeds of a thousand possibilities. The avenues open to her were limited only to her imagination.

She finally turned around to face her friends. She surveyed their faces one after another. She knew each one intimately and she gauged their strengths and weaknesses.

"Dallas," she began, "I want you to take Clifton and DeWalt back to Tictus. I want you to build up our ground forces for another assault. Clifton and DeWalt, I want you to pilot two transport craft to drop our ground forces on Bennetov Station."

The three men exchanged glances while they took in the full weight of what she said. Bennetov Station occupied a manmade island afloat on a vast ocean planet. A ground force on Bennetov Station would be trapped with no way off, but the Regiment would also be trapped there. The station's weaponry wouldn't do it any good against a ground assault.

"Alice, I want you and Innyria to lead the rest of Eckhart's fleet against Niri station."

"But Rixby," Dallas interrupted, "if you go against Dhairi with only four ships, the assets will destroy you for certain. Triorium drive can't protect you from them."

"Don't worry about that. I have a plan."

"Is there anything else you want us to do?" DeWalt asked. "You know we'll do anything to help this cause."

Rixby took a deep breath. "Actually, there is one thing I need someone to do. I need someone to execute a strategic strike on another target."

“What’s the target?” Alice asked.

“I won’t tell you which target it is. I want only the person carrying out the attack to know that. I will tell you that it’s a kamikaze strike. Some might think it’s a suicide mission, so I’m asking for some brave person to volunteer. It isn’t absolutely guaranteed the person will get killed—only highly likely.”

No one answered for a minute, and Rixby watched each of them considering it.

Finally, Staton broke the silence. “I’ll go.”

DeWalt grabbed his shoulder. “Damn, man!”

Staton gave a nervous laugh. “All the rest of you already have jobs, right?” He faced Rixby. “I’ll do it.”

“Thank you, Martin. I’ll let you know the details when we’re ready to carry out this campaign.”

Rixby headed for the elevator, and only Squids went with her. He didn’t speak until the doors closed. “Thank you for taking over.”

Rixby pulled the emergency stop to freeze the elevator outside the medical bay. Squids jumped a foot in the air, but Rixby was all done explaining herself. “I need you to do something for me, Squids.”

“Anything. Is anything wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong. I’m leaving the *Atera* for a while. I want you to run things while I’m gone.”

He looked down at her. His empty eye sockets showed no expression. “Are you coming back?”

“Yes, I’m coming back. I should only be gone a day or two. Then we’ll get this campaign underway and start pushing back against the Regiment.”

“Where are you going?”

“That’s my business. Keep an eye on Eckhart for me.”

“Of course. He’s in good hands here.”

“Good.” She opened the elevator doors, stepped back out into the medical bay, and left him inside it. She sent him back up to the bridge.

She returned to the medical waiting area. Everyone was still there. “What’s up?” Dallas asked.

“I want you, Alice, and Bing to come with me. We’re going on a trip.”

She led the three of them back down to the landing platform, and they loaded up in the *Marathon*. The *Atera*’s mechanical crew

had restarted the *Marathon*'s power systems. Other than that, the ship was undamaged.

Rixby climbed onto her old workstation and entered the coordinates into the navigation system. Alice sat down and gasped when she saw the regulators. "You can't be serious!"

"I'm very serious. Take us out, Alice."

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16

Rixby waddled down the ramp, but she stopped and turned back when Dallas and Alice both tried to follow her. “You three stay here. I’ll be back in a little while.”

“You shouldn’t go in there.” Dallas rotated his helmet back and forth to scan the area. “You shouldn’t go in there at all, let alone by yourself.”

“That’s my decision.”

“What if you don’t come back?” Bing asked from the hatch opening. “What’s the point of you taking over the fleet if you’re only going to kill yourself?”

“I won’t kill myself, and I will come back. Go back inside, Dallas. You, too, Alice. You’re too valuable to go in there.”

“And you’re not?” Alice hissed. “At least let us protect you.”

“That’s exactly why you can’t come with me. Go, Dallas.”

Dallas didn’t move. Rixby saw herself pulling rank on him. She never would have dared to do that before, but she was prepared to go a lot further now.

Alice snorted through her mask, turned on her heel, and stormed back into the *Marathon*. Dallas waited a little longer. “Are you sure you’ll be okay?”

She waved her antennae at him. “I’m doing this for the fringes, Dallas. Isn’t that obvious to you by now?”

“I guess so.” He climbed back up and took a position next to Bing. “I’ll be scanning the outpost. If I see you in trouble, I’m coming after you.”

She tittered. “Thank you. It’s nice to know you still care about me.”

She walked away, but not before looking back several times to make sure her three friends stayed on the ship. She didn’t want them coming with her or even watching what she was about to do.

She waddled into the thickest mobs in the Guardian Colony’s central market. This colony was one of the remotest on the fringes. Most aliens didn’t dare to come here, and the *Marathon* had never been here—ever. Eckhart wouldn’t dare to set foot on this planet.

She lost sight of the *Marathon*. Good. She didn’t want anyone

knowing she came from that ship.

She buried herself in the teeming alien hordes. No one bothered her. Lumaria were all but invisible, especially in a cutthroat hellhole like this.

She made her way through many streets and eventually entered a tavern where she barely came up to the patrons' knees. She wedged herself into the crowd and finally worked her way around the bar.

The patrons stepped on her a few times, and some even kicked her without realizing she was there. The bartenders didn't even look at her. She went over to a cabinet under the sink, opened the door, and crawled inside.

She curled herself under the pipes, secured the door so not even a wink of light entered, and tugged on one of the pipes.

The bottom fell out of the cupboard and she tumbled down a slippery chute. It spat her out in a dim, dark cellar under the tavern. The patrons' footsteps kept drumming on the ceiling above her head.

Rixby picked herself up and let her antennae adjust to the darkness. She didn't hear anything. The place stank of waste and rot. The floor felt damp underfoot and her feet squished in something sticky when she stepped forward.

She made her way deeper into the cellar. A bunch of barrels, crates, and boxes towered in piles along the walls. Only the faintest gleam came through the floorboards above her head.

She groped her way to the farthest back corner. No light made it back here, and she couldn't see a thing. She had to keep contact with the barrels to steer herself.

She stopped in the smelliest, most fetid part of the cellar. Slime oozed out of the stone wall. Whoever owned this cellar had stacked the goods on racks to keep everything out of the muck.

She searched for any sign of life, but she didn't see anything. She bent in close, trying not to choke on the putrid fumes. She almost gave it up when a whispering voice drifted to her ear. "You came back."

"I need your help," she squeaked. "The fringes are in danger."

"Word has reached me."

"Will you help us?"

"We are not in danger."

"Would you let all these others die? Would you let me die?"

“Nooooo,” the soft voice hissed. “I would not let you die.”

“Help us. We can’t do this without you. I wouldn’t ask if there was any other way.”

“There is another way.”

“Please…for me.”

“You are loyal to the Earthling.”

“The Earthling is trying to save us all. If word reached you, you should know that.”

“You are changed.”

Rixby didn’t answer. If her changing stopped this creature from helping the rebellion, then she was all out of options. She’d made her request. Now it was his turn.

“You should have come back sooner.”

“Will you help us? If you do…” She summoned all her courage to force out the next words. “If you help us, I’ll come back for good. I’ll stay…with you.”

“You will never come back to stay with me.”

Rixby lost patience. “Then do it for the fringes. If you sit back and watch, then you are changed, too.”

“I am not changed. I never change.”

“Then help us. You’ve been alone long enough.”

“Very well. I will do it for you.”

Rixby breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank you.”

“Go. Do not come here again.”

She walked away fighting down panic. She hardly dared to believe she’d made it out of that meeting alive.

She dragged some crates over to the chute, climbed up it with difficulty, and exited the tavern back onto the street. She had to pause there to catch her breath. The meeting went much better than she hoped. She started to feel more cheerful now that it was behind her.

Now she could go back to the *Marathon*, but she had one more visit to make first.

She returned to the market and found an ordinary stall manned by Qaedda. They all looked up when she waddled in, but she ignored them and went to the blobulous Shaivi seated on a stack of pillows in the back.

He chuckled and all his folds of fat jiggled. “It’s Gnovonia! Welcome back, little friend.”

She sat down next to him, and he handed her a long hookah

pipe he was smoking. She wedged the tip under her fur and inhaled. “How are you, Ulnus?”

“This rebellion is a bad business. I hear you’re in charge of it.”

“Eckhart is in charge of it. I’m just handling things in his place until he gets back on his feet.”

Ulnus jiggled again. “A bad business. I never liked it.”

“It could be over in a few days if you used your army.”

He burst out laughing. “Is that why you came here—to ask for my army?”

“Not to ask. I just visited Yausqith.”

Dead silence fell over the stall just in case Rixby wasn’t sure the Qaedda were listening to her conversation. They all spun around and stared at her in horror.

Ulnus stopped laughing and puffed on his pipe for a minute of tense silence.

“Bring out your army, Ulnus,” Rixby told him. “The fringes need you. The rest of the fringes are fighting the Regiment. This is your chance to get off the Guardian Colony and make a name for yourself.”

He didn’t answer. He didn’t have to. She didn’t have to ask. As long as he knew Yausqith was coming, the rest would fall in line. They would have no choice.

She stood up and patted Ulnus’ wobbly side. “I’ll see you soon, Ulnus.”

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17

Rixby stopped by the *Atera*'s medical bay, and Bing accompanied her over to Eckhart's bed. "How are you, Eckhart?"

He gave her a weak smile, but he looked as terrible as ever. His chalk-grey skin stretched over his skull, and his body barely moved when he gasped for breath. "I'm starving!" he rasped. "I've had nothing to eat but Eplite for days."

She laughed and patted his arm. "You'll be up and around soon. Then you can stuff yourself with as many ration packs as you can stomach."

He started to laugh and choked. Bing stepped in and had to give him another dose of Eplite. "Don't make him laugh," Bing ordered. "Keep it serious or I'll have to break out the medical authority."

Eckhart started laughing again, and it took much longer for Bing to calm him down. The harsher Bing tried to be, the funnier Eckhart found it.

"Maybe I should leave you alone," Rixby suggested. "I just wanted to make sure you're okay."

"He's fine," Bing replied. "He's definitely going to live."

"But only on a diet of Eplite multiple times a day, right?" Eckhart returned. "I don't know if I want to live like this."

"Just heal up. I don't much like being in command."

Bing snorted. "You could have fooled me."

Rixby squeezed Eckhart's hand again and went back to the elevator, where Squids met her. Rixby got her game face on while she rode up to the bridge. All her chess pieces were in place. Now it was party time.

She clambered onto her podium and switched on the feeds from all the Regiment stations where she'd positioned her forces.

Clifton and DeWalt's personnel transports hung in space over Bennetov Station. The *Marathon* headed an absolutely massive force of fighter squadrons in orbit over Niri.

Namol had outdone himself by rallying thousands of Jackal Clan fighters to move against Pion Station. Word of Rixby's plan had spread all over the fringes. Every alien and his mother wanted to come out and mop the floor with the Regiment. The new Immortals

leaders were proving their worth and had assembled an equally impressive force against Beyama.

Vuldak had finally grown a pair and decided he couldn't let the other gangs outdo him. The Chosen force was as big or bigger than the other two combined.

Now nothing remained but for Rixby to carry out her plan. She headed the tiny group of four battleships back to Dhairi and read the station's defenses. They were as strong as ever.

Her instruments also showed her the five assets patrolling the area. That was perfect. They were right where she wanted them.

She maneuvered the *Atera* to the sentry crossing and an innocent-looking corporal flashed onto Rixby's display. "Stand off, unknown battlecruiser. Retreat to a safe distance before we open fire."

Rixby didn't answer. She stabbed her finger into the controls between her feet and unleashed a blistering Triorium ejection at the sentry crossing. She blasted it out of the sky and it exploded in a rain of sparks.

The pounders on the ground rotated to aim up at the *Atera* and all four battlecruisers opened fire. Rixby hit the pounders one after the other. The last three belched off shots, but none of them could touch the *Atera*'s Triorium fields.

"Full assault!" Rixby ordered. "Fire at will!"

The *Kestera* swerved sideways and hammered the barracks and the control centers. The *Sitera* targeted the Datrium cisterns, while the *Atera* destroyed the landing zone.

Colossuses and Banshees boomed in destruction down there. The alien force struck so fast the Regiment didn't have time to counter their assault.

Rixby finished off the last Colossuses and turned her attention to the biocontainment unit. If the Regiment was storing anything dangerous in there, it would be loose on the station in a minute.

She let loose a vicious Triorium barrage and hit the unit. It blasted outward in a flying cloud of brick and dust…and five starbursts rocketed out of the ruined station.

They hurtled straight for the four alien ships and the assets pounded the Triorium fields with punishing force. The *Atera* staggered in midair and then the engines seized.

"We're going down!" the Nalzai scanner operator shrieked.

"Steady!" Rixby called. "Hold the line!"

“Two of them are attacking us!” the technician shrilled. “The engines are shutting down.”

The ship groaned and an emergency alarm blared on Rixby’s workstation. She looked down, but not to check the engines.

Her gaze flickered over the other battles going on. The two transports had landed on Bennetov and disgorged thousands of armed aliens. They swarmed the station in droves, breaking into every building.

The station’s pounders swiveled down to aim at the alien horde, but someone in command must have realized the truth. If the Regiment shot downward, they would punch a hole in their own floating platform. The station would sink with everyone on it.

Datrium blasts flew thick and fast as the alien ground force overran the station. They chased Regiment personnel into the ocean, gunned them down, and trampled them in the stampede.

Regiment Banshees launched from the landing zone before the aliens overran that, too. They exploded the remaining ships with Halfanite, but the Banshees in the air must have received the same order. None of the stations’ weapons would work against this invasion.

The *Marathon* led an opposite assault against Niri. Flocks of ships descended on the station en masse. The pounders erupted trying to shoot everyone out of the sky. The Colossuses and Banshees twirled through the throng, but none of them could make a dent in such numbers.

Alien ships surrounded the Colossuses by the dozen. For every ship a Colossus destroyed, the aliens landed hundreds of shots on the ship’s most vulnerable parts. The Regiment couldn’t hit everyone, and barely came close to threatening any of them.

The squadrons wheeled in close to the ground and raced for the pounders. They unloaded at low altitude and blasted the ground guns to smithereens while the pounders still aimed their barrels at the sky.

More squadrons zoomed in and cut the station itself to pieces. Wave upon wave smashed every building. The squadrons tore the landing zone apart and destroyed every ship still on the ground. Regiment personnel bolted for safety only to fall before the aliens’ fire.

Pion, Beyama, and Jonovich were suffering a similar fate under the Jackal Clan, Chosen, and Immortals assault.

“Ma’am?” the young technician began.

Rixby looked up. The assets were still laying into the *Atera* with everything they had. The other three ships were fighting back as best they could, but as before, both sides reached a stalemate.

None of that mattered. Rixby had sprung her trap. Pion Station, Bennetov, Jonovich, Niri, and Beyama were all going down in flames.

She turned her attention back to her last and final weapon. She switched the feed over to Nox Station, a high-value target deep inside Regiment-controlled space.

Dozens of colonies surrounded the enormous station. Those colonies housed millions of Earthling residents who thrived in the station’s protection.

Nox wasn’t inside the Earth solar system, but it was so far behind the Regiment’s defenses that no aliens would be able to reach it with any sizable force.

A single, derelict freighter puttered toward the station on a well-traveled trade route. The freighter carried Kaslanyx, an inert building material the fringes always shipped to the Earth solar system.

Most of these harmless freighters had to stop at Nox. The sentry crossing would never see anything out of the ordinary in the freighter’s cargo, origin, destination, or the alien pilot at the helm.

The freighter approached the sentry crossing and received clearance to land its cargo. The ship floated past the crossing and entered Nox’s orbit. The instant the ship passed the crossing, it gunned its engines to full power.

The ship plunged through the atmosphere, picking up speed by the second. The façade concealing its true nature evaporated to reveal a hold packed with Acrine mines.

The ground guns rotated skyward, but it was too late. The freighter’s rear hatch popped and a lightning-fast Volt runabout dropped out into the atmosphere. The freighter plunged nose first straight into the station’s Datrium storage cistern.

The igniting Datrium created a chain reaction with the Acrine and a blooming blanket of fire rippled across the planet. It incinerated the station, the colonies, and several thousand miles of terrain beyond them.

The pounders got off ten or twelve shots that sizzled the Volt’s tail as the little craft rocketed through the atmosphere. The Volt hit

the sentry crossing and blasted its way to safety in open space on its way back to the fringes.

Rixby burst out laughing. Staton had made it. She didn't think he would. He had more gumption than she gave him credit for.

"The *Kestera* is hailing us, Ma'am," Rixby's scanner operator announced.

Rixby started to answer when a familiar grizzled countenance flashed onto her display. "Admiral Keating!" she chirped. "What a delightful surprise."

"I'm prepared to accept the terms of your surrender, little alien," he snarled, "starting with you handing over Adam Eckhart and everyone else involved in breaking him out of Regiment custody."

"Oh, I don't think we'll be negotiating any terms today, Admiral," Rixby replied in her friendliest squeak.

"We can crush you," he barked. "What do you think will happen when all our assets attack your ship at the same time?"

"You might destroy us, but you'll never stop the rebellion. If you check your readings, you'll see some of your other stations aren't faring so well."

Admiral Keating opened his mouth to speak until someone tapped him from off the screen. He leaned out of sight and then jolted back with a very different expression on his face. "What the hell are you doing?"

"It's very simple, Admiral. Every time you deploy these assets against us, we'll erase five of your stations…or six, depending on how I feel when I finish breakfast. Every time you capture any of our people or threaten us or suggest that we surrender, we'll wipe out another five. If you like your chances, by all means keep demanding our surrender and threatening to crush us. You'll only pave a trail of destruction between us and Earth."

"You won't get away with this!" he hissed.

"I already have, and there is absolutely nothing you can do to stop me. Goodbye, Admiral. It was nice talking to you."

She closed the channel, and at that moment, a deathly chill gripped her heart. A pall fell over the *Atera,* and everyone on the bridge froze under the oppressive cold.

Rixby shivered, and the assets' assault reached a fevered pitch in the ominous silence. They hammered the ship until the crashes and bangs became deafening. The young technician in front of Rixby's podium clapped her hands over her ears and screamed.

Rixby's eyes remained riveted to Dhairi station. The assets struggled, but they couldn't break free as thousands of alien ships rushed out of black space to swarm Dhairi Station.

The station, its guns, and all its personnel vanished under the assault. The assets became more frantic, but they couldn't move. They remained glued to the four battleships no matter what.

Ulnus' army flooded the station and left nothing in its wake. By the time it pulled back and retreated to the fringes, they left Dhairi a wasted, lifeless rock, the way it was when the Regiment first settled here.

A sudden shudder quaked the *Atera* and the cold evaporated in a rush of warmth. Rixby drew in a shaky breath and the assets streaked away in five matched blazes of brilliant light, but they didn't return to Dhairi.

They zoomed deeper into space on their way back toward Earth and left the alien fleet in possession of the field.

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LOST

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1

Fourteen Colossus-class warships hovered in orbit over the Cuiq Colony. Similar warship formations stood stationed around the other twelve habitable planets in the Uezuno system.

Dozens of Banshee-class fighter craft buzzed in the atmosphere, patrolling Cuiq day and night. Superintendent Davis shot them an upward glance and smacked his lips in exasperation. The sound racked his nerves, and had been interrupting his sleep for the last week.

His deputy, Lieutenant Robinson, raced up to his side. “We’re having some trouble with the Murchison Center, sir. They’re running out of fresh diapers, and some of the nurses are whispering that a cholera outbreak might be starting in the orphans’ section.”

“We don’t have time for a cholera outbreak, Lieutenant. If we don’t evacuate those infants in the next twenty-four hours, they’re dead either way.”

“I understand, sir, but the nurses are saying they can’t evacuate. The children are too fragile, and if we don’t stop the outbreak now, it’ll spread to the rest of the convoy. We can’t risk that.”

Davis groaned and glanced upward again. The Banshees seemed to be gathering directly above his head just to harass him, but that couldn’t be right. They couldn’t even see him from up there.

Another city official came up and started practically yelling in Robinson’s ear. Davis heard something about refugees. He tried to catch what they were saying, but at that moment, a woman in a business suit approached on his other side.

Yet another official started barking into Davis’ other ear, and he couldn’t hear a thing. He thought she was talking about evacuating the jails, but he couldn’t be certain.

This evacuation was becoming the biggest logistical disaster of Superintendent Davis’ career. If the rumors were true, it was about to become the biggest humanitarian disaster of the century, too.

He set off walking through the streets. All these voices rattled his sleep-deprived brain.

Everyone in the government, the health service, the military, the social services division, the school system, and most families on

Cuiq were all operating on limited food, maximum stress, and zero sleep. Nerves were frayed and, in most cases, already at the breaking point.

The official clung doggedly to Davis' side as he walked. She was talking about another outbreak of something, but Robinson snapping orders to his secretary stopped Davis from hearing what it was an outbreak of.

He really didn't care anymore. He was responsible for evacuating more than fourteen million people off this planet in less than twenty-four hours. That was saying nothing about the other twelve colonies in this system. If the rebel alien hordes attacked sooner than the twenty-four-hour deadline, everyone on Cuiq would be dead, including himself.

Lieutenant Robinson kept pace with Superintendent Davis, and Robinson's secretary hustled along to match them. The whole party moved off through the streets toward the Murchison Center. Davis didn't relish finding out what was waiting there for him. A bunch of infants in a cholera outbreak was the last thing he needed today.

He'd made it one block when ten Regiment officers came toward him from the opposite direction. They all wore immaculate uniforms, and didn't look like they belonged in a colony descending into panicked chaos.

Captain Houk of Colossus *Matador* strode up to Davis. "Good news, Superintendent. Admiral Irving is assigning four more ships to the evacuation. That should give us more than enough space for your entire population. We won't be as crowded as we originally thought."

"I don't give a damn about four more ships, Captain!" Superintendent Davis pushed right past him, and Houk fell in step at his side. The other Regiment officers surrounded Davis, and the city officials dropped back to make room for them. "We need more time! If we can't have that, four more ships won't make any difference."

Houk's face fell, and his cheeks drained of color. "I'm sorry, Superintendent, but there is no more time. We should have been loaded up and gone by now as it is. We're already pushing out the deadline way too far."

"What are you talking about? You gave us two days—*two days!*—to evacuate fourteen million people! It's impossible."

"I'm sorry, but you were lucky to get that much time. This

whole operation is taking way too long. We've already had reports from nearby systems—"

Houk trailed off as four more city planners charged up the street, heading straight for Davis. He groaned inwardly, but there was no escape.

They mobbed him and all started talking fast. He held up his hands for quiet. "Hold it! Hold it! One at a time." He turned to one he recognized from the veterans' hospital. "You first, Mary."

The elderly lady took a deep breath, but at that moment, a distant explosion rocked the ground beneath their feet. The pavement vibrated, and several nearby buildings shuddered.

"What was that?" Lieutenant Robinson murmured.

Another rumble rattled windows above their heads, and almost instantly, Captain Houk's watch issued a piercing shriek. He glanced down at it and jumped. "That's the early warning alarm! Get your people out now!"

He whirled away, and all the Regiment officers took off running down the street. Superintendent Davis, Lieutenant Robinson, and everyone else in their group stared after them in shocked disbelief.

Did he really just say the words *early warning alarm*? Davis couldn't get his brain to function. He glanced over at Robinson, and then at the faces of the administrators around him. They blinked at him with the same dazed expressions on their faces.

"I guess we should—" Davis began.

A high-pitched whistling screech cut him off and a fast-moving fighter craft hurtled up the street just a few dozen yards above Davis' head. It wasn't a Banshee.

It rolled wing over wing between the buildings and pounded the walls with dozens of plasma shots. Hundreds of windows exploded up there, and then the walls started to crumble.

Brick and broken glass hailed down onto the little group and peppered the pavement, but that was only the beginning. More of the same variety of fighter craft rocketed up the street following the first attacker. They bombarded the colony with hundreds of shots. They targeted buildings, houses, schools, hospitals, libraries, community centers—everything.

One of the officials screamed and tried to make a break for it, only to run into a mountain of rubble smashing down right in front of her. Davis grabbed her just in time and hauled her back toward him.

She stumbled, and the nurses surrounded them. The group closed in a tight bunch, with everyone holding onto everyone else. Davis dodged backward to head for City Hall, only to get cut off by more explosions ripping up the pavement under his feet. He veered into a side street and shoved his companions into a run. The nurses kept shrieking every time one of the attackers came close to hitting them, but standing in one place wasn't an option.

The enemy came pelting back with impossible speed. The invading force grew bigger with every passing second, until what looked like thousands of spacecraft darkened the skies.

Davis couldn't recognize any of them, but no way could these attackers belong to the Regiment. The attacking aliens surrounded every Colossus in overwhelming numbers. Davis couldn't even see the Banshees anymore.

A few Banshees descended on the city, and they started shooting, too. They tried to hit the alien fighters, but the aliens were too fast for them. The Banshees ended up hitting the buildings and doing even more damage.

Davis dodged around another pile of debris and spotted City Hall ahead. A single Colossus drifted out of the mayhem, heading for Lindquist Field. The field was one of more than twenty landing sites where the ships were supposed to pick up the evacuating colonists. Now only one ship was coming.

Davis checked to make sure the rest kept up with him, but there was nothing he could do if they didn't. "Get to the field! Go! Go!"

They kept running, and narrowly missed getting blown to smithereens as more fighters spiraled around City Hall and blasted the building to powder.

A hurtling geyser of broken concrete washed over Davis, and Robinson pulled him sideways. Davis staggered into an alley, and the party burst out onto a long, straight street leading to the field.

The Colossus inched lower to the ground. Davis caught fleeting glimpses of random people running in twos and threes for the field. He didn't see any other ships coming down to pick them up.

The Colossus rotated its hatch toward him, but it was still too high to open. He put on speed. He couldn't tell anymore if his companions were pulling him, or if he was pulling them. Just a few hundred yards and they'd be safe.

They burst onto the field, sprinting for the ship, when another ominous whistle pierced the din. It gave a characteristic falling

shriek and then a massive concussion struck the Colossus right in front of Davis' face.

The ship detonated in a gargantuan blast that scorched miles of terrain all around it. It devastated the field, and the shockwave flattened buildings as far as the veterans' hospital.

The exploding Colossus seemed to be an unspoken signal, and a fleet of giant battlecruisers plunged through the atmosphere. No Regiment warships stood in their path. The alien invaders had already finished off the Banshees that were supposed to protect the colonists' escape.

The alien force blanketed the planet in explosions. They pounded every structure to powder. Ultra-fast fighter craft hunted down any fugitive Earthlings that tried to flee.

The invaders spread across the planet while battlecruisers bombarded everything from orbit until nothing remained to offer any resistance.

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2

The *Marathon* floated to a standstill in the outer rim of the Inoash system. The ship established an orbit around the thirteenth planet, while the alien army took a position beyond the last space rubble.

Hundreds of battlecruisers and thousands of fighter craft had gathered from all over the alien fringes for this parlay between the alien leadership and the Regiment General Staff. A hundred Stormbreakers formed a barricade between the fourth and fifth planets. The monstrous gunships didn't move as Regiment Colossus-class and Banshee-class craft eased into position.

Every Regiment vessel showed the unmistakable energy signatures of powering up their weapons systems. Datrium surged through their plasma feeds, and every gun aimed at the *Marathon*.

"I really don't think they trust us," Bing remarked.

Alice snarled through her mask. "They better not."

"It really is kind of cute that they think we're so much of a threat," Dallas Eldridge observed. "It's flattering, you know?"

Bing giggled. "If I knew this was what it took to get them to take us seriously, I would've organized this rebellion a long time ago."

"Wake up and smell the Datrium, shithead," Alice hissed. "You didn't organize it."

"I didn't?" Bing raised one of his many limbs to his head and furrowed his brow. "Oh, yeah. I didn't."

"Here they come," Rixby squeaked, and hopped down from her workstation. Her big feet slapped the floor, and she waddled past Dallas on her way off the bridge. "Let's go."

Bing, Dallas, and Alice gazed into the tactical grid as another ship detached itself from the Regiment line. Banshees parted to let it through. The Volt runabout glided toward the sixth planet and started orbiting it.

"Wow! They brought a Volt," Dallas murmured. "No way could that little ship stand up to the *Marathon*. They must be really scared of us."

"They don't want to frighten us," Bing replied. "They want to give us a false sense of security."

Dallas laughed loudly, and Bing joined in. The idea of the

Regiment scaring the fringe rebels had become the most ridiculous notion imaginable in the last few weeks. The Regiment was on the run. They were the ones who needed security. They wouldn't ask for this meeting otherwise.

Alice let out a long, husky breath. "I guess we're going."

She gripped the regulators and steered the *Marathon* toward the sixth planet, establishing an orbit opposite the Volt. Both ships revolved in space for a minute while they studied each other.

Rixby came padding back onto the bridge. "What's taking so long? Do we have a meeting or not?"

"We don't want to be the first ones there," Dallas told her. "We don't want them to think we need to meet with them."

"They're descending," Alice reported. "We can go now."

The Volt broke orbit and spiraled down to the ground. Alice guided the *Marathon* into a corresponding landing run. She drifted down onto a wide grassy plane surrounded by mountains. The Volt sat about a mile away, and Alice parked the *Marathon* nearby.

Bing wriggled with glee. "I can't wait! This is going to be hilarious."

"Try not to trip over yourself," Dallas told him.

"Don't say anything, either," Alice growled. "Don't even open your mouth."

"But what about my scintillating sense of humor?" Bing asked. "I could put them at ease with my witty repartee."

Dallas laughed again, and Alice hissed through her mask. "I swear I'll cut your head off if you say a damn word out there!"

Rixby interrupted again. "Just remember the Stormbreakers can still target us down here. If anything goes wrong on the line, we'll be the first ones to get it. Now come on. I have work to do back on the *Atera*."

The skeleton *Marathon* crew climbed down to the cargo hold, with Dallas and Bing trading jokes and laughing, much to Alice's annoyance.

But Bing cut it off real quick when the crew walked outside. Seven Regiment officers lined up over by the Volt. The seven men wore perfect uniforms, and eyed the four friends with obvious suspicion.

"Can you see who they are?" Bing murmured to Dallas.

He cocked his helmet from one side to the other. "They're all admirals—Joiner, Stockdale, Christensen, Cruise, Pence, Van Camp,

and Thiel. Thiel is the highest ranked. He'll be the one doing the talking."

"They're talking about us," Alice muttered.

"Probably talking about what disgusting, filthy alien scum we are," Bing suggested.

"We better get acquainted, then." Rixby started forward, but she couldn't move very fast through the grass. It came up to Dallas' knees, which meant that only Rixby's antennae extended over the tallest tips.

She had to stop more than once to struggle over the bumpy and rough ground underfoot. In the end, Alice got so exasperated that Dallas picked up Rixby and carried her the rest of the way.

The admirals advanced, too, keeping to an orderly line. They made a much more impressive sight than the mismatched friends.

The admirals and the *Marathon* crew halted about twenty feet away from each other. Dallas put Rixby down, and she went through another confused scrabble righting herself, turning to face the admirals, and then moving to a spot where the grass didn't completely conceal her.

Bing could have gotten quite a bit of comic mileage out of the scene, but he barely noticed. He sized up the Regiment officers in front of him and checked their strengths and weaknesses, in case he and his friends had to fight their way off this planet. All the admirals had come unarmed, and this was the first time in Bing's time on the *Marathon* that he could remember coming to a confrontation like this without some weapon.

Eckhart always wore a sidearm, even in environments he thought were friendly. The sidearm was part of Eckhart's everyday attire. He never went anywhere without it if he could possibly help it.

But the admirals coming unarmed didn't put Bing's mind at ease. More battleships crowded this out-of-the-way system than had ever met in battle or at any other time. If a fight broke out here, the *Marathon* wouldn't make it off the planet.

Rixby was right. The *Marathon* and its crew would be the Regiment's first target. Every Stormbreaker would hammer the ship before they bothered to mess with the rebel force.

Rixby finally figured out which direction she should be facing and waved her antennae at the admirals. This must have been their cue to begin the meeting. They started forward, and halted again

about ten feet away from the *Marathon* crew.

Now Bing could read their name badges. He could also see the all-too-familiar sneer on each of their faces when they saw who was coming to meet them.

"This rebellion cannot be allowed to continue," Admiral Thiel began. "Civilians are being killed on both sides."

"The Regiment has been killing aliens for centuries, Admiral," Rixby squeaked. "This rebellion will continue until the fringes return to alien control. That's the only condition under which the rebellion will end."

Admiral Thiel scowled down at her. "You're in charge of this rebellion, aren't you? Our records show that you were the one who communicated with Admiral Keating right before he was killed at Dhairi Station. No one who was involved in the killing of Regiment-protected citizens will be allowed to escape justice when this is all over."

"I'm not in charge of this rebellion," Rixby told him. "I *was* in command of the fleet that attacked Dhairi, but as you can imagine, I only answer to someone higher—as I'm sure you do too, Admiral."

"And no one on our side will face any kind of Regiment justice," Alice snarled, "not unless you're prepared to hand over every officer who's ever killed or injured any alien civilian in Regiment history."

Admiral Thiel opened his mouth to answer and then closed it. If the Regiment tried to hand over every officer who'd ever killed or injured any alien civilian in Regiment history, they'd be handing over the entire Regiment. Everyone knew that.

"The Regiment has been operating with impunity on the fringes for hundreds of years," Dallas added. "We've had enough of it. If Earthling civilians are dying now and their settlements and colonies are being wiped out, it just means aliens are balancing the books against the Regiment's body count."

"This is outrageous!" Admiral Joiner blurted out. "We won't allow you to continue this reign of terror. You gave us your assurance you would let us evacuate the Uezuno system, and then you attacked anyway. You attacked before the deadline. We never even had a chance to evacuate."

"*We* weren't responsible for that attack, Admiral," Rixby replied. "We issued the deadline, and then another alien group jumped in and perpetrated the attack."

Admiral Thiel narrowed his eyes at her, and then at the rest of

the *Marathon* crew. “I don’t believe you.”

“If we wanted to wipe out the Uezuno system, we wouldn’t have bothered to issue the deadline in the first place,” Bing told him. “If we wanted the colonists dead, we could have killed them all without wasting our time waiting for you to evacuate.”

“That’s neither here nor there,” Rixby interrupted. “I see on our records that you’re evacuating the rest of the Earthling population from your other stations and colonies.”

“Of course we are! We have no reason to trust you won’t do the same thing again.”

“Whether we do it again or not isn’t relevant,” Alice snarled. “Our aim is for you to withdraw from the fringes. If you do it in response to these attacks, then the attacks are serving their purpose.”

Bing savored the horrified expressions flitting across the admirals’ faces. They really were petrified of these bloodthirsty aliens.

“If you plan to slaughter every Earthling on the fringes anyway, why did you agree to meet us?” Admiral Thiel demanded. “What do you want? What will you accept to stop these attacks so we can withdraw in peace?”

“Withdraw in peace,” Bing mused. “I don’t think those two concepts go together. You’re only withdrawing because you *don’t* have peace. See?”

Rixby cut him off. “Actually, Admiral, there is something we want. You’ll hand over the five experimental assets that attacked Akkek Stratha and Coleman DeWalt at Dhairi. As soon as we see conclusive proof that all five have been neutralized, we’ll halt the attacks. Then the rest of the Earthling population can fall back to Earth.”

“And you’ll hand over every other experimental asset you’ve been developing in your secret labs,” Alice hissed, “and don’t waste our time trying to tell us you don’t have them.”

“You agree to swear off these experiments in perpetuity,” Dallas added. “You agree never to hybridize Earthlings with alien DNA, or whatever it is you’ve been doing to develop these superweapons to annihilate the fringe aliens. The instant we receive even the flimsiest rumor that you’re experimenting again, the truce is off.”

“What truce?” Admiral Thiel growled.

“The truce that will start as soon as you hand over these five

assets," Rixby replied. "We're at war, and we'll stay at war as long as those assets are at large."

Admiral Thiel glanced sideways at Admiral Van Camp, and then clenched his jaw. "I wish I could hand them over. They've gone off the reservation."

"What does that mean?" Rixby asked.

"It means they've gone rogue," Dallas explained. "It means the Regiment has lost control of the assets. The assets have gone off on their own and broken contact. No one can control them anymore. They're doing whatever they want."

She peeped, jumped, and spun around, twisting her antennae around to stare up at him. "Where are they?"

"You tell me," he replied. "Your records probably have a more accurate fix on the assets' last known location."

Rixby blinked, and then she shivered. "Damn it!"

"Can we go back to negotiating now?" Admiral Thiel interrupted.

"You've heard our terms," Bing told him. "You created these assets, so you're responsible for bringing them in."

"We can't bring them in," Admiral Van Camp replied. "We've tried."

"Admiral Keating told Blake Clifton that the Regiment implanted kill switches in Coleman DeWalt and Akkek Stratha," Alice countered. "He gave Clifton to understand that the Regiment implanted these kill switches in all their assets, which means you could shut down these assets from a distance."

"Unless you don't want to," Dallas pointed out. "It would be so convenient if you led us to believe the assets were out of your control when you were secretly allowing them to run amok on the fringes."

"That would be a very Regiment thing to do," Bing added. "Very in character with all the other heinous shit you've done."

"And continue to do," Dallas finished.

Admiral Thiel looked back and forth between the four friends. "Which of you is actually in charge of this rebellion?"

"All of us," Bing replied.

"And none of us," Dallas added.

"Which is why we all came along for this pleasant little chat," Alice snarled. "This is definitely my idea of a morning well spent."

"Well, Admiral?" Rixby prompted. "You've heard our condition.

When do you think you can deliver the assets to us?"

Admiral Thiel opened his mouth, but at that moment, a brilliant explosion of bright white light ruptured in the heavens above the field. It blazed as bright as the sun, and then another two flashed near it.

"No!" Admiral Thiel spun around and waved his arms at it. "*No!*"

No one heard him. Lasers erupted from the shimmering halo around each dark figure that hovered in the center of each star. The lasers pelted the field, tearing up the sod and chewing toward the *Marathon*.

"Get back to the ship!" Alice roared.

Dallas snatched Rixby off the ground, and the three friends bolted. Admiral Thiel kept waving his arms at the assets hanging over his head. "*No!* You'll ruin everything! Fall back!"

A laser sizzled through the air and cracked down right on top of him. Then another pointed blast exploded the Volt to smithereens.

The other admirals scattered, and Bing started to turn back. "They're stranded! We should—"

A crushing barrage of lasers hit the dirt right in front of him. They ripped a huge trench in the sod and cut him off from reaching the admirals. Alice collided with him and hauled him away. "We can't help them! Come on!"

Bing staggered after her, and the next second, the four friends charged into the *Marathon*. All four headed for the bridge, and Dallas set Rixby on her workstation.

She punched buttons between her feet. "All ships—withdraw! Get away from the assets! Take refuge in the fringes!"

Some of the alien fleet obeyed her. They turned tail and streaked away into the stars, but at least as many ignored her. They unloaded their weapons on the assets that took a position between the aliens and the Regiment.

Three assets zoomed away from the sixth planet and rejoined formation with their comrades. The five of them plastered the aliens with lasers, and several shots hit the *Marathon*.

"Celdian shielding is holding at 60%!" Bing reported from the navigation station.

"Don't mention Celdian shielding again until it falls below 20%," Alice roared. "I have more important things to think about."

"The Chosen are engaging with the assets!" Rixby chirped.

“Vuldak isn’t responding to my orders.”

“Bastard!” Alice snarled. “I always knew he was a traitor.”

“Forget him!” Rixby replied. “Leave him to die. Fall back with the rest of the fleet, Alice! Go now!”

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3

Far on the rim of space in a forgotten system well outside the normal freight routes, a little-known species occupied a lonely planet in the Vaebbe system. The planet's atmosphere and caustic soil gave rise to poisonous, carnivorous plants that regularly devoured all animal life, including the alien inhabitants.

Life was harsh, but the population grew up tough, and after centuries, they developed the ability to survive and thrive in the brutal environment.

Very few ships came out this far, so their arrival was always an event when they did. The residents of a small village all got to their feet when a silvery speeder drifted through the atmosphere and landed on the nearby riverbank.

Mothers held back their children to stop them from approaching the aliens who disembarked. The new arrivals observed the crude village from across the river. They measured the inhabitants for what seemed like a long time before they crossed the stepping stones and approached the village.

The mothers had to fight their children even harder to pull them away from the visitors. Six tall, thin aliens strode into the village, examining the residents with as much interest as the children examined them.

The visitors halted in the center of the village and surveyed the crowd. The whole audience consisted of women and children. No men came out of the huts to greet the visitors.

A young boy broke away from his mother and raced up to the strangers. "This way, sir! This way!" He bowed several times and waved to one of the huts.

"Thank you," the tallest replied, and ducked inside the house.

The boy stuck his head under the wall flap to watch and listen. Fifteen village men squatted in a jumbled bunch, with no rhyme or reason to their meeting. The tall visitors squatted down amongst them, and the ship crew's leader leaned close to someone's ear.

"The rebellion needs you. Bring your people out and help us."

"How many are there?" the shaman asked.

"Five that we know of. There might be more. We don't know."

“Where are they?”

“We don’t know that, either,” the lead visitor replied. “I’m sorry, but we can’t defeat them without you.”

The shaman grunted something. He didn’t turn his head to look at the visitor once. “We will come.”

The visitor stood up, and all his men left the hut with him. The boy hurried over again despite his mother’s efforts to hold him back. “Are we joining the rebellion, sir? Are we going to fight?”

“*You* aren’t,” the visitor told him. “You’re too young.”

“I can fight.” The boy started walking rapidly to keep up with the visitors as they approached the river. “Take me with you. I can help. I want to fight the Regiment.”

“Get your shaman’s permission. If he agrees, you can come with him.” The visitors reached the stepping stones and started to cross the river.

“Thank you, sir!” the boy called after them. “Thank you! I won’t let you down.”

The tallest visitor waved without turning around. He and his men loaded back into their ship. The villagers craned their necks to watch the ship lift off the ground. It would disappear. How much longer would it be before another came this way?

The boy raised his hand to shield his eyes against the sun. The ship rose and started to recede into the sky. It wheeled toward the sun, and almost as soon as it vanished, a vicious jet of red light exploded out of the sun, smashed into the village, and blasted the shaman’s meeting house into a million pieces.

Screams echoed out of the village as a blinding corona of light floated out of the sun. It burned and flickered in the sky above the village. It started spitting those red streaks everywhere, and more houses blasted apart.

Twirling splintered wood pelted into the women and children. Everyone ran for cover, but four more of those brilliant lights whizzed through the air above the village. They cut every house apart and dropped men, women, and children without mercy.

The boy charged back to the house where the shaman and the other men had been meeting. He rummaged in the wreckage, searching everywhere for a weapon he could use against those things. He didn’t know what those lights were, but he’d just given that visitor his word that he would fight.

He glanced over his shoulder. The lights hurtled back and forth

in all directions. They seemed to take a particular interest in the youngest children. The attackers didn't notice him working to unearth the shaman's weapons stash.

The boy heaved a giant beam off a crushed body underneath the collapsed roof. He barely registered that the dead person was his own father. That didn't matter.

He rolled his father out of the way and unearthed a piece of beaten leather covering a trapdoor in the floor. He pried it open and jumped down.

He clambered out a second later, holding a massive cannon almost bigger than himself. It weighed so much he had to drag it, and he propped it across the beam he'd just moved.

The lights were still rocketing over the landscape, destroying everything in sight. Three of them sailed off to the south, where more villages dotted the river all the way to the mountains.

The boy didn't understand why those things had attacked his village, and he didn't care. This had something to do with the rebellion.

The visitors had come to ask the village men to join the rebellion These lights attacked to stop the village men from joining. It all made sense.

The boy pulled one of the village's deadliest weapons from under the floor and fitted it into the cannon. The lights still didn't see him.

He ducked behind the beam and sighted down the cannon. He trained the barrel on the nearest light. The boy tightened his grip on the cannon and blocked out the sounds of women and girls screaming.

The light came to rest right in his sights. The boy held his breath and then fired. The shot smashed into the light, and it exploded in a flash of brilliance. The glare blinded the boy, and he screamed.

He rolled behind the beam, and the cannon fell out of position. The boy's hands flew to his ruined eyes. He couldn't see anything. He didn't see three other lights shooting toward him. They converged over the collapsed house.

The boy froze when he heard the same sizzling sound, and then dozens of those red lines set the house on fire. The house vaporized, taking the boy, the cannon, and everything within a mile with it.

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4

Adam Eckhart stepped down from the *Marathon*'s hatch and looked around the area. Thick trees darkened the hills to his right. A great swatch of stars brightened the other side of the valley. The glow of three moons glimmered on the river. The water made a gentle musical bubbling sound, and a cool breeze moaned in the trees.

Blake Clifton walked down the ramp to Eckhart's side. "This is beautiful. It looks like Earth."

"It does?" Eckhart asked. "That's interesting."

"Why is it interesting? There must be a lot of planets on the fringes that look like Earth."

Eckhart shrugged. "I wouldn't know."

"Earth has a lot of different biosystems," Martin Staton added. "Practically every planet on the fringes resembles some part of Earth. There are deserts, forests, oceans, savannahs—the works."

"Do you miss Earth?" Eckhart asked.

Staton looked away toward the river. "When I see places like this, I do."

"What about you, Clifton? Do you miss Earth?"

"I do," Coleman DeWalt cut in. "I miss it a lot…though I doubt I could ever enjoy it the way I did before. I know too much about it, now that I know what the Regiment has been doing."

"Earth isn't responsible for what the Regiment does," Staton pointed out.

"Earth has nothing to do with this." Eckhart crossed to the *Marathon* and closed the hatch from the outside. "Let's get this over with. I'm hungry."

"God forbid you should get hungry, Eckhart," Clifton teased.

"If you'd been fed nothing but Eplite for the last four weeks, you would be hungry, too."

The others laughed and fell into a single-file line. They started walking up the river, with Eckhart in the lead.

They hiked up the river for almost a mile before Eckhart turned into the trees. He walked for a long time before he spotted a fire flickering in the distance. He headed for it, and eventually saw four men sitting around the fire.

They were normal Earthling men like himself and his companions. One of them had sandy red hair and freckles. Two others had black hair and olive skin. The last one was blond.

Eckhart heard them talking before they realized anyone was approaching.

“I told you to keep an eye on the village, Jenks,” the blond one said. “I don’t know how you can sit there making excuses when you were the one who dropped the ball.”

“Don’t give me that shit. We had to go after the other villages before they armed. You heard Nuñez before the strike. You can’t just change the strategy in the middle of a battle.” The red-haired one turned to one of his black-haired comrades. “Back me up, Nuñez.”

His comrade nodded. “He’s right, Fontana. I did say we had to finish all the villages as quickly as possible.”

“Then it’s your fault Schiff is dead,” Fontana countered. “We should have seen this coming.”

“We did see this coming,” the last one added. “That’s the whole reason we had to—”

They trailed off as Eckhart and his friends filed into the clearing. The four men stiffened in their seats. They only relaxed slightly when they realized they were facing four Earthlings just like themselves.

“Evening, gentlemen.” Eckhart sat down on a log between Nuñez and Fontana. “Do you mind if me and my boys join you?”

“Who the hell are you?” Nuñez demanded.

“Me? I’m Adam Eckhart. Ask Jenks here. He knows who I am, don’t you, Jenks?”

Jenks glared at him. “You’re that bastard that’s leading the alien rebellion.”

Eckhart shrugged. “That doesn’t matter. We wanted to talk to you boys.”

“How did you find us?” Fontana asked. “No one is supposed to be able to find us.”

“You didn’t make it too hard,” DeWalt replied. “You’ve left a path of destruction across the galaxy. Any idiot would have been able to follow it.”

“That explains why you were able to, then,” the last man growled.

DeWalt turned to face him. “Your name is D’Alia, isn’t it?”

The guy shut his mouth instantly. “How do you know who we are?” Nuñez asked.

“Staton here is in the Regiment—or he was,” Eckhart replied. “See, the Regiment is in disarray since the rebellion started. Everyone all the way up the chain of command has better things to do than to update their records. It wasn’t too hard to figure out where you boys enlisted, where you did your training, and when you dropped out off the face of Earth to enter the Regiment’s experimental labs.”

“What do you want from us?” Fontana asked. “You’re taking your lives in your hands coming here.”

“I don’t think so,” Eckhart replied. “You men signed up to defend the Earth solar system from the alien threat. Did the Regiment tell you the Earthling population needed you? Did they tell you the Regiment was too weak to protect Earth without some superweapon to counter the aliens’ power? I’m betting none of you signed up to kill Earthlings, even if we are fighting for the other side.”

“None of you has killed any Earthlings yet…” DeWalt trailed off. “Except for Schiff. He killed Admiral Thiel. That was off script, wasn’t it?”

“You killed seven admirals because they were negotiating with the aliens,” Clifton added.

“But that isn’t why Schiff killed them,” Eckhart finished. “He killed them because Thiel was negotiating to turn you over to the aliens. He was going to trade you for the lives of every other Earthling on the fringes. Schiff couldn’t stand that, so he attacked. How am I doing so far? Do I have a pretty clear picture of your position here?”

“Which explains why you’re out here,” Staton finished. “You’re off the reservation because you’re worried the Regiment will turn you over to the aliens. You’ve all outlived your usefulness. You’re liabilities to the Regiment, and they’ll sell you down the river now that it suits them.”

“You’re also worried about the Regiment using those kill switches they implanted in you,” Clifton went on. “That’s why you’re doing these strikes so far away from Earth. You want to put as much distance between yourselves and the Regiment while you tell yourselves that you’re still carrying out your mission of fighting the fringe aliens.”

“You don’t know shit,” Nuñez snarled. “You’re aliens in Earthling bodies.”

“I’m not,” Staton replied. “I’m still on active duty with the Regiment. I swore an oath, too, and my oath doesn’t include slaughtering millions of innocent aliens.”

“But apparently yours does,” Eckhart chimed in. “That planet you wiped out yesterday is the twelfth one you’ve razed. Is this how you want your wives and kids to remember you? As mass murderers?”

“You leave our wives and kids out of this,” Fontana spat. “The aliens have killed more Earthlings than we could ever kill in our lifetimes.”

“You think so?” Eckhart asked. “Have you ever heard of Kruvin?”

He saw instantly that they did know about it. “That doesn’t mean—”

“What about the battle of Borth?” Clifton asked.

No one answered.

“Have you heard of the Massacre of Ashaos?” Staton asked.

“Fine!” Fontana exclaimed. “So the Regiment might have done a few things that didn’t quite fit with their mandate, but—”

“One of you took Akkek Stratha’s power,” DeWalt interrupted. “She went through the same Regiment experiments that you did. She suffered the tortures of the damned in the Regiment lab…which means you boys went through the same thing.”

“You don’t have to do this,” Eckhart finished. “You don’t have to be these monsters. It isn’t too late for you to do the right things.”

“Oh, that’s rich!” D’Alia sneered. “Did you come here to beg for the lives of your little alien friends? How sweet!”

“I didn’t come to beg for their lives,” Eckhart murmured. “I came here to beg for yours. The aliens *will* win this war. We know now where we can find a weapon strong enough to destroy you… and even if that boy hadn’t killed Schiff yesterday, we have Yausqith.”

A noticeable chill fell over the four assets. Fontana and Jenks both spun around to stare at Nuñez, who did his best not to react.

“You can’t win,” Eckhart went on. “If you don’t stop this rampage, the aliens will kill all four of you.”

“What do you want?” Nuñez hissed. “What are you doing here? What do you want from us?”

“I want you to turn,” Eckhart replied. “I want you to come over to our side—the right side. I want you to turn against the Regiment the way Staton here turned. He knew the right thing to do, and he did it. That’s what I call a man—a man I admire.”

The four assets glanced over at Staton, but he showed no sign of embarrassment at Eckhart’s words. Staton kept gazing back at the assets with the same direct, challenging stare. He didn’t regret his actions one bit.

“So you want to use us,” Fontana barked. “You want us to use our powers against the Regiment. Well, we won’t! We aren’t traitors.”

“I don’t want you to use your powers against the Regiment,” Eckhart said. “I just told you we don’t need your powers. You four are the only thing keeping us from destroying the Regiment right now. Thanks to your own bloodthirsty actions, we now have a way to defeat you. I don’t give a rat’s ass if you ever use your powers again on either side.”

“Why would we turn, then?” Nuñez asked. “What do you possibly hope to gain by getting us on your side?”

“One of these days, the alien horde is going to roll up to the very doorstep of Earth. I could order them to raze Earth the way they’ve been razing everyone else, but I won’t do that. We’ll stop at the edge of the solar system and the Regiment won’t be able to stop us.”

“And then?” Jenks asked. “What would possibly stop you from killing all Earthlings?”

“We *are* Earthlings,” DeWalt replied. “We don’t want to destroy Earth.”

“We want you to testify about what the Regiment’s been doing,” Eckhart went on. “Akkek is dead, and so are her three friends from the Silvercloud Vault. DeWalt no longer has his powers thanks to you boys. We need firsthand accounts of the Regiment’s experiments, and we need living samples of the weapons they created to destroy the fringes. We need you to testify on Earth so no one ever does anything like this again.”

The four assets exchanged glances, but none of them spoke.

Eckhart got to his feet and bumped Clifton’s shoulder. “You boys have a good evening. I really hope you consider my offer. It might be the only way you four can make it out of this war alive.”

He walked off with Clifton, DeWalt, and Staton behind him. They hiked back to the *Marathon*, and Eckhart opened the hatch.

Before he went inside, he stood outside and observed the beautiful night. It really was quite delightful. “Is Earth really like this?”

“Parts of it,” Staton replied. “Some of it is worse than Heike U-6.”

“A lot worse,” Clifton added.

“Do you think they listened to you?” DeWalt asked. “Do you really think there’s any chance they’d turn?”

Eckhart shrugged. “They didn’t try to kill us. That was a promising sign.”

“Only you could come up with a plan like this, Eckhart,” Clifton remarked. “Only you’d give those guys a chance.”

“If we win this war, we’re gonna need someone to tell the people of Earth what the Regiment has been up to. Earthlings hate aliens. They won’t accept the testimony of any alien. It has to be Earthlings.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it.” DeWalt started walking up the ramp to enter the ship. “We’d better go before Eckhart turns to cannibalism.”

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5

Lasers showered the giant crystal city of Yevepra in the Phiyevis system. The strikes came from high in the atmosphere, smashed prismatic domes in showers of broken glass, and ruptured the ground around flocks of fleeing alien civilians.

Officers from the Yevepra army stationed themselves at strategic intervals along the main vehicle corridors. They waved women, children, and the elderly out of town toward four enormous runways on the nearest army base.

“Keep it moving!” Commander Odais bellowed. “Don’t stop and don’t look back!”

He lunged into the crowd and scooped up a child that had fallen under the stampeding mass. Odais shoved the child into his screaming mother’s arms and propelled her into the mob.

He herded the aliens faster as the attackers advanced closer. Four blinding lights hovered over the city, decimating everything in sight. The crystal domes boomed one after the other, and more refugees screamed as giant shards stabbed down into the crowd.

Dozens of people went down under the stampede, but the fleeing crowd didn’t stop for anything. Odais searched the street behind him for any sign that the mob was thinning out. He could only see more and more heads, more and more bodies, as far as the center of town. Would the army ever get away in time?

More screams made him look back toward the airfield. Ships launched into the sky, and two of the lights rocketed toward them, spitting countless lasers. The shots pounded the escape craft loaded with civilians.

Two of the escape ships foundered. They returned fire, but they couldn’t flee with those terrible attackers blocking their way. Tiny black outlines of people winked inside the shining halos of erupting lasers.

The lasers crashed against the ships’ hulls, and the noise reached a deafening pitch. It drowned out the noise on the ground.

The crowd started to slow as everyone looked up to see the outcome. Many people actually turned and tried to fight their way against the crowd to get away from the airfield.

Odais swam his way toward them. “Keep moving! Keep going! Don’t stop! Get to the base! GET TO THE BASE!”

Another colossal boom from overhead swallowed his voice, and the other two attackers swooped up behind the crowd. They fired directly into the stampede and everyone tried to scatter, but too many people blockaded the street. No one could move, not even Odais.

“Keep going!” he roared at the top of his lungs. “Keep moving toward the base!”

No one heard him. Lasers exploded into the crowd, cutting down hundreds with every pass.

The shots veered into another crystal tower on the right side of the street and the building detonated in a thousand razor shards. Every particle sliced into the crowd, taking out dozens of people in the mayhem.

Odais hunkered in place, trying to summon the courage to call out again. At that moment, the two attackers over the base converged on the nearest escape ship. They both hit it at once, and the ship exploded in a giant fireball.

The crowd panicked even more at the sight of their only salvation going down in flames. The ship drifted for a second and then smashed into the airfield. Flames enveloped it, and the crowd surged backward, taking Odais with it.

He tried to fight them, but the people around him lifted him off his feet and carried him with them. They surged him directly into the enemy’s range, and the two attackers behind the crowd unloaded even more viciously.

The crowd ran straight into their shots, and a blistering laser swished straight in front of Odais’ nose. Twenty people dropped in front of him, and the heat seared his cheeks. The people carrying him dropped him, and he fell among piles of bodies.

He tried to pick himself up and looked up into the burning halo in front of him. The unmistakable black shadow of a man floated beyond the ring of light. Whoever it was looked right down at Odais.

The next second, a projectile smashed into the halo and swatted the attacker away. Odais wavered on his hands and knees, looking up at thousands of ships descending through the atmosphere.

A giant battlecruiser unleashed Triorium ejections on the four attackers. The enemy in front of Odais whirled away to confront the

newcomers. The four strangers rocketed away into the atmosphere to assault the alien fleet descending on the city.

Odais staggered to his feet, searching everywhere for someone left alive. Bodies carpeted the street, but far in the distance, he spotted the escape ships vaulting into the sky. They whizzed away one after another.

Aliens from several species cowered behind a few buildings left standing. The four attackers had their hands full with the incoming fleet, and no longer bombarded the city.

Odais hurdled bodies and bolted down the street. “Come on! Keep moving toward the base! We can get away! Come on!”

He waved everyone into the open. The fleeing civilians still cast terrified glances toward the sky, but the attackers didn’t come back.

Odais got them moving, but much more slowly. Children screamed when they saw the bodies. Women and the elderly took much longer, climbing over all the obstacles in their path.

Hundreds of people herded toward the base, and Odais breathed a sigh of relief when he finally found the very back of the crowd. He positioned himself behind them and prodded them forward whenever they slowed down.

The crowd turned a corner and came in sight of the base. Four escape ships waited for them on the airfield. That would have to be enough.

Distant booms distracted Odais, and he dared to look back. The alien fleet traded Triorium shots with the strangers. Lasers shattered on the battlecruisers’ hulls, and the noise started to build again as the battle sank lower in the atmosphere.

Odais pushed harder against those in front of him. He shouldn’t look back, but he couldn’t help it.

An enormous battlecruiser veered behind the attackers to cut them off from the fleeing civilians. The ship planted itself behind Odais to block any lasers from reaching him and his people.

“Hurry!” he yelled. “We’re almost there!”

Someone screamed up ahead, and the civilians raced onto the airfield. One of the other escape ships launched and streaked away. The second one was closing its hatch. Only two remained, and three officers Odais knew stood at the last one. The officers waved civilians away from the hatch and pointed to the last ship. The others must all be full.

A few mothers tried to fight their way onto the second to last

ship. Odais charged onto the field and started to pull them away.

The battlecruiser's hull echoed under an incessant barrage of lasers. Its Triorium field took the brunt of the assault, but the constant pounding drove it backward. It kept crawling inexorably toward the airfield.

Odais charged to the last ship and took a position with the other officers. "Come on! We're almost there! Come on!" He started pushing people inside. Only about five hundred people remained in the city. He could still save them.

They packed the hatch, struggling to get on board as the battle got closer. Three attackers tried to rush the sentry battlecruiser.

They tried to cut around the ship to reach the airfield, but at the same instant, another flock of battlecruisers pounced from directly above. They plummeted from the atmosphere and started hammering the four attackers without mercy.

An unholy battle broke out right on top of the airfield. Flying lasers and billowing Triorium ejections licked the escape ship. People tried to break away again, but Odais and his fellow officers grabbed them and wrestled them into the ship by pure strength.

One of the crew came to the hatch and yelled to the officers, but no one could hear him over the noise. Odais feared the worst and tried to hustle his people faster, but there was no more space on board. The hatch started to close. People jumped onto the ramp, grabbed onto their neighbors, and dragged them to the ground in their desperation to escape.

Odais grabbed random children and lifted them onto the ramp. Strangers hauled the children into the hold against the children's screaming efforts to reach their mothers on the ground.

Odais kept hurling children onto the ramp until it lifted too high for him to reach. A few stragglers dangled from the hatch, trying to scramble into the ship. Odais ran behind them and pushed against their legs to lift them the rest of the way inside.

The ship rose out of reach. He and six other officers remained on the ground, along with about seventy people. There was no other way out.

Odais raced over to the remaining civilians. "To the train station! We can get underground there!"

The other officers heard him, and they all joined in. They surrounded the civilians and started steering them off the airfield. The path to the underground train station led away from the battle.

It was their best chance for survival.

Odais and his fellow officers linked arms and forced the civilians in front of them. Odais bellowed himself hoarse. “Keep moving! Don’t stop! We can make it!”

He no longer believed his own words. Desperation made him say anything, no matter how outlandish. He just had to keep going.

Crashes and explosions shattered his eardrums. The battle sounded like it was right on top of him, but he no longer wasted time looking back. The enemy would hit him any second now, and then it would be all over…or maybe the new arrivals who’d come to save the city would hit him.

The crowd streamed into the city and the civilians started running faster. Fear caught them and they took off at top speed for the train station. The officers let go of each other, and everyone ran together.

The crowd swerved around a corner, and the civilians dove down the stairs into the underground. The officers followed.

Odais actually started to think he might make it when a catastrophic concussion struck the pavement right next to him. The shockwave flung him to the ground, and the world dissolved in chaos around him.

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6

Odais blinked and opened his eyes. He looked up and struggled to understand what he was seeing. A Yakit bent over him and grinned. “Are you alive, man?”

Odais opened his mouth and then frowned. “Where am I?”

“You’re on a ship—an alien ship. Don’t worry. You’re safe. The battle’s over. Open your mouth. I need to give you another dose of Eplite.”

Odais sank back on the pillow, trying to get his brain working. He opened his mouth, and the Yakit gave him a large dose of Eplite.

Odais swallowed it. “How did you find me? What happened on Yevepra?”

“We didn’t have to find you, pal. We were already there. This ship is the one that tried to protect you from the Regiment’s assets. We saw the whole thing. We’re just sorry we couldn’t get there sooner, but we didn’t know where they planned to strike. It’s a shame you lost so many people. You did a great job saving as many as you did.”

Odais stared at him. “You saw all that?”

The Yakit nodded and held out one of his many limbs. “My name is Bing…and you’re Odais, aren’t you?”

“How do you know that?”

Bing started to say something when a swishing sound interrupted him. He looked over his shoulder. “You woke up just in time. There’s someone here to see you.”

Odais picked up his head. It hurt like hell, and his eyes didn’t want to focus right.

He stiffened when an Earthling walked across the medical bay toward him, but this man was unlike any other Earthling Odais had ever seen. This one looked relaxed and at home, and he was surrounded by aliens. Their presence didn’t unsettle him at all.

Two masked Bions, a Lumeria, an Urus, two Sadaaths, and an enormous Iawei walked in with him, but they all halted and stood back while the man approached Odais’ bedside.

He smiled down at Odais. “How are you doing? My name is Adam Eckhart…and you’re Odais, aren’t you?”

“How do you know who I am?”

“We know all about you. You’re the one who went to the Vaebbe system to recruit the Groras people to the rebel cause. You got their agreement, but the Regiment’s experimental assets attacked and wiped them out before the Groras could strike back. Am I right?”

Odais’ hand flew to his head, and he went back to looking at the ceiling. “How do you know about that?”

“We have Yausqith,” Bing told him.

Odais turned and gasped. “You what?”

“I need to talk to you,” Eckhart interrupted. “You knew the Groras had some weapon that could kill these assets. You went there to get the Groras to destroy these assets.”

“But the Groras are all dead now,” Odais pointed out. “They can’t help anyone anymore.”

“Hardly anyone knows that the Groras did fight back—at least one of them did,” Eckhart went on. “The assets knew the men you met with were in a meeting to discuss getting involved in the rebellion. The assets attacked their house first and killed everyone inside, but a young boy dug into the wrecked house and found one of his father’s weapons. He fired on one of the assets and killed it.”

Odais clamped his eyes shut. “He’s dead, isn’t he? It’s my fault. I told him he could fight with us. I never should have said that.”

“He would have been dead either way,” Eckhart replied, “and now we know the Groras had a weapon strong enough to destroy these assets.”

“So what do you need me for?”

“I need you to tell us what the weapon is. You know more about Vaebbe than we do. We need to find whatever the weapon is so we can use it against the assets.”

“You don’t need a weapon,” Odais countered. “You have Yausqith. Yausqith is stronger than anything the Groras ever had. He can kill the assets.”

“I don’t want to kill the assets. I only want to capture them.”

“Are you insane?” Odais exclaimed. “Are you out of your mind? How can you want to capture the assets? How can you even think of leaving them alive?”

Odais glanced over at Bing, but Bing only shrugged. He must think Eckhart was crazy, too. Any sane person would think the same thing.

“I have my reasons for wanting to capture the assets alive…and no, before you ask, it has nothing to do with them being Earthlings like me. I want to do this because it’s the best thing for the fringes. Now I need you to tell me what the weapon is.”

Odais opened his mouth and hesitated. Was this a trick? Were all these aliens conspiring with this Earthling for some evil purpose? Why would they want to capture the assets alive, unless they wanted to use the assets as weapons against the fringes?

Eckhart waited, but when Odais didn’t answer, he turned to Bing. “What’s his condition? How much longer does he have to stay down here?”

“He can leave now if he wants to. He might be a little delicate for a few days, but with a few more doses of Eplite, he should be fine. I’m pretty sure Rixby knows where his people fled to. We can drop him off with them when he’s ready.”

Odais started to sit up. “You know where my people went?”

“Yeah,” Eckhart replied. “We can take you to them. You don’t have to help us. We don’t make anyone help us who doesn’t want to—but before that happens, I’d like to show you something. Come with me, if you’re feeling up to it.”

Bing helped Odais sit up, and after giving him another dose of Eplite, Odais eased onto his feet.

The aliens hanging around the door parted to let Odais and Eckhart through. Eckhart stepped into the elevator, and an elderly Bion came with them, but the man said nothing on their way upstairs.

“We contacted your escape ships while you were unconscious,” Eckhart told him. “They think you’re a hero. They’re very anxious to get you back. By the way, we lifted the refugees and your fellow officers from the train station, too. They’re all on board. We’ll take you all home as soon as you’ve all had enough medical treatment.”

Odais stared at the wall. “I’m not a hero. We lost too many people on Yevepra. I didn’t do enough.”

“You did more than anyone could have asked. Thousands of people are alive today because of you.” The elevator stopped, and Eckhart held the door open for Odais to step out.

They emerged on a wide-open floor surrounded by a complete ring of huge windows. The stars twinkled in the darkness, and Odais stared out at thousands of ships hovering in formation. The battlecruiser on which Odais stood occupied the central position.

Three other identical battlecruisers hung close to it.

The rest were a mixed bag of gang freighters, fighter Velocities, and mismatched gunrunners of every class and variety. There didn't appear to be any system to show which ships belonged to whom.

"This is Aistenz Trotaer's fleet. This is one small part of the fringe rebellion—Aistenz's part of it. That"—Eckhart pointed to a burned hulk near the battlecruiser's starboard engine—"that ship belongs to Namol, the leader of the Jackal Clan, and those two belong to the leaders of the Immortals. That one over there belongs to Chemorix Yacrorilia, who took over the Chosen after Vuldak Dhaddet." He waved behind him toward the old Bion standing against the elevator door. "This is Squids. He was Aistenz Trotaer's majordomo before Aistenz died and left me as his successor."

Odais turned in a full circle, taking in the sight. The view brought him back around to staring at Eckhart. "*You're* in charge of the rebellion? But you're…"

"An Earthling, I know."

"How can you…how can *you* be in charge of the rebellion? I heard the leader was named Eckhart, but I thought it was an alien."

"My friends downstairs say I'm an honorary alien, and the Regiment says I'm an Earthling. I live between two worlds, but who I am doesn't matter. What matters is that the Regiment is trying to annihilate the fringe aliens, and I won't let that happen. I'm not the only Earthling who thinks it's wrong and wants to stop it. That's why I want to capture the assets alive—to stop the Regiment. It has nothing to do with showing them mercy or giving my own species special treatment. I want to capture them because it's the best thing for the fringes. Maybe now you'll believe me."

"The weapon comes from a plant native to Vaebbe," Odais blurted out. "The natives combined the plant with the skin of a certain animal that lives in the planet's soil. Chemicals from both the juice and the skin create a poison that disrupts the electrical signals of cells—but the cells of other native animals and plants. The Groras used it to hunt the creatures in their native environment. Everything on Vaebbe is stronger and more dangerous than anything else anywhere. The Groras needed a weapon to counter the defenses of nearly everything."

"So this poison disrupts electrical signals—bioelectric signals," Eckhart repeated. "Did you know all this when you went to Vaebbe to recruit them?"

“I wasn’t sure if their weapons would work against the assets. I only knew the Groras were a powerful warrior people and that they had some exceptional weapons—weapons no one else had.” Odais looked back out at the stars. “I never should have gone there. They would all be alive if I had only stayed away.”

“You did what you thought was right. Now, thanks to your visit, we have a way to fight the assets.”

“So you’ll use the Groras’ weapons to *save* the assets.” Odais snorted. “That’s even worse.”

“Listen to me, pal,” Eckhart told him. “I’m an Earthling, and unfortunately for me, I was in the Regiment for a while before I came to my senses and dedicated my life to bringing them down. I understand how the Regiment works. I understand how Earthlings work.”

“I didn’t mean—”

Eckhart held up his hand for quiet, and for some reason Odais couldn’t understand, that gesture silenced him instantly.

“I understand how they work, and the only way to make sure the Regiment doesn’t come up with another lunatic plan like this again is if we capture these assets alive. If we get Yausqith to kill the assets for us, the Regiment will only come up with some other weapon to use against us.”

“Us?” Odais asked. “You mean the fringe aliens.”

“Yes—*us*. I’m up to my neck in this now, just in case I wasn’t before. If this rebellion fails, I’ll be the first to die. The Regiment has already tried, so don’t think I’m in any better a position than the rest of you.”

Odais breathed a heavy sigh. “All right. I’ll help you. Maybe you could contact my people and let them know I’ll be staying for a while.”

“I’m sure they’ll understand, and you’ll be going home even more admired than you are now.” Eckhart patted him on the back. “You’d better go back to the medical bay. You look tired, and Bing would kick my ass if I let anything happen to you. I’ll come and get you when I need you.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to Vaebbe. We’ll need to do some research on these substances to figure out how we can use them against the assets.”

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7

Eckhart halted in the corridor, where Alice, Dallas, and Innyria waited for him. “Maybe you two should stay out here—at least until I break the ice.”

“I can break the ice even better than you can, Eckhart,” Alice snarled, and Innyria laughed.

“You’d probably wind up breaking his skull.” Eckhart turned to Dallas. “Are you sure about this?”

Dallas shrugged. “Not really, but it’s better than nothing, isn’t it?”

“I guess we have nothing to lose at this point.” Eckhart approached one of the many doors in the *Atera*’s crew quarters section. He pressed the release, the door opened, and he and Dallas entered the comfortable cabin.

A young man sat curled up by the cabin window. He gazed out at the stars, but when he saw Dallas, he swung his feet to the floor to face his visitors. “Hi.”

“How are you doing, Jacob?” Dallas asked. “This is my friend, Adam Eckhart.”

Jacob Short nodded. “I’ve heard of you. Everyone has heard of you.”

“Dallas has told me about how you two met in the Regiment lab,” Eckhart replied. “He’s also told me how the Regiment kidnapped you and took you away from your family. I’d like to promise we’ll take you back to them, but that might take a while.”

“I understand,” Short replied. “I’m grateful to your people for taking me on board. I’ve heard all about what happened on Dhairi. I know everyone who was left on the station wound up dead because of the alien rebellion.”

“I didn’t have anything to do with that,” Eckhart replied. “I can’t say I wouldn’t have done the same thing, though. I understand Dallas has filled you in on what the Regiment plans to do to the alien fringe population, and why we had no choice but to mount this rebellion.”

Short gazed out the window. “Yeah. I know all about it.”

“Dallas tells me that you’re a good man, Jacob. Considering

what the Regiment did to you and your family, I was wondering if you would be interested in helping us defeat them."

"Defeat the Regiment?" Short gasped. "That's impossible."

"Not really. As a matter of fact, we aren't too concerned with defeating the Regiment. That part should be pretty easy. It's something else we're struggling with at the moment—something that would actually allow us to make sure no one ever does anything like this again. What do you say? Will you help us?"

"How can I help? I don't know anything. I'm just a lab tech."

"You studied chemistry at school, didn't you?" Dallas inclined his head to one side. "Your record states that you studied biochemistry and chemical synthesis before you went to work for Epeirogen Labs."

"That's right."

"We have an alien on our crew that's really good with chemical synthesis, too," Eckhart told him. "Do you think you could work with her on a certain synthesis project? It would really help our cause. How do you feel about working with aliens?"

Short went white. "Uh...I don't know. I don't know any aliens."

"This one is probably the most non-threatening alien alive," Dallas told him. "She's half your size and she's very friendly."

"She's also a genius," Eckhart added. "She's already researching the chemicals involved. She'll bring you up to speed in no time."

"Uh…okay. I guess so."

"Thank you, Jacob," Eckhart took a deep breath. "I have another favor to ask you. I know it's asking a lot, but we can't stop the Regiment without you."

"What do you want me to do?" Short cringed onto his couch. "I can't do anything. I don't have any combat experience."

"You don't have to fight anyone—not in that way," Dallas told him.

"We want you to testify against the Regiment," Eckhart explained. "We want to take a case before the Intergalactic High Court in Zurich. We want the people of Earth to know what the Regiment's been doing in their name. It's the only way to make sure the Regiment never does anything like this again."

Short turned back to the window and murmured in a small voice, "I thought you might say something like that. I was expecting this."

"Think it over," Dallas told him. "If everything works out for the

best, you'll be on your way back to Earth, or the Lunar Research Station where your family is. You want to go back to your old life with a clear conscience."

"I'll do it." Short looked straight up at Dallas, and then met Eckhart's eyes. "I'll do whatever it takes."

"Wonderful. If you come with me, I'll introduce you to your little alien colleague."

Eckhart and Dallas flanked Short on the way out of his quarters. Eckhart relaxed considerably when they got out into the corridor and found Alice and Innyria gone.

In fact, they didn't see a single alien until they rode downstairs and found another lab next door to the medical bay. They went in, and Short stopped dead when he spotted Rixby standing on the worktable.

"This is your new colleague," Eckhart announced. "Her name is Rixby. Rixby, this is Jacob Short."

"Hello, Jacob," Rixby squeaked. "Welcome to the *Atera*."

He gulped. "Uh, thanks."

She waddled over to a control station embedded in the worktable. She stepped on the controls in between punching buttons with impossible speed. "I'm researching the native plants and animals from Vaebbe, but as you can imagine, the records are pretty sparse."

"We should take a trip over there," Eckhart replied. "Odais can show us the plants and animals we need, and we can take samples."

"Just what I was about to suggest," Rixby chirped. "How does that sound to you, Jacob?"

He stared at her until she twisted her antennae around and examined him.

Eckhart clapped Short on the back. "Dallas and I will just make ourselves scarce while you two get to know each other better. Let me know if you need anything."

"See you later," Rixby squeaked.

Dallas and Eckhart headed for the exit. Short remained rooted to the spot. Eckhart heard Rixby talking to him, and he and Dallas made their escape.

"I still find it hard to believe you brought him from Dhairi," Eckhart remarked when he and Dallas got into the elevator.

"You had a few other things on your mind at the time…and afterward."

Eckhart snorted. “You could say that.”

“So you’re still sticking with this whole High Court plan of yours, aren’t you?” Dallas asked.

“I don’t see any other way. Do you think I’m crazy, too?”

“More than ever. This whole plan is nuts.”

“I guess it is.”

“Are you sure this has nothing to do with Earth?” Dallas asked.

“How could it? I don’t give a shit about Earth.”

Dallas faced forward and shrugged.

“What?” Eckhart prompted. “What do I care about Earth?”

“Maybe this is all your subtle way of getting right with Earth in a way you otherwise never could.”

“What do you mean by ‘getting right with Earth’?” Eckhart asked. “I don’t get you.”

“You’ve been nothing all your life. You’ve been surrounded by aliens. Why do you think you joined the Regiment? You needed some connection with your own people.”

“You’re full of shit!” Eckhart countered.

“Tell me this. Had you ever met another Earthling before you joined the Regiment?”

Eckhart frowned. “I guess not.”

“Of course you didn’t. You wouldn’t have seen any on Parilia. You spent your whole life around aliens. You needed to find a place for yourself among Earthlings, and you’re still doing it now. You dreamed up this plan of taking the Regiment to the High Court so you could establish yourself and justify yourself to the rest of the Earthling population. You want to find a way to be something other than an alien-loving traitor to your own species.”

Eckhart glared at his friend and then exploded in laughter. “How long have you been working on that theory? Stick to shooting things, my friend. Leave the psychoanalysis to the experts.”

“Why do you think everyone else in the whole damn rebellion thinks this plan is cracked?”

“Okay. Let’s say you’re right and this whole rebellion is my pathetic way of compensating for my insecurities. Let’s talk about you instead.”

“What about me?” Dallas asked. “I don’t have to prove anything to Earth.”

“That’s exactly my point,” Eckhart replied. “You were born and raised on Earth. You still have family back on Earth. You fought and

bled and almost died for the Regiment and Earth."

"Yeah? So?"

"So you know Earth and the Regiment better than I do—a lot better than I do. Do you seriously believe that, if we drove the Regiment back to Earth and left it at that, they wouldn't dream up some other experimental weapon to defeat the fringes? Are you actually telling me that—in all your infinite wisdom about Earthlings and the Regiment and their ways?"

Dallas turned away and looked at the wall again. "No. I'm not saying that."

"You know they would. That's the very first thing they'll do the instant they all land on Earth. They'll come up with something a thousand times worse than these assets. They'd come up with something they could deploy from Earth—a disease or something that would spread beyond the Earth solar system without putting any Earthling in danger. The High Court is the only way to make sure they don't, and for that, we need evidence. We need first-hand testimony from people who've been through their labs."

Dallas didn't reply, but it was clear to Eckhart that he didn't disagree.

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8

Eckhart and Odais stood at the command podium on the *Atera*'s bridge. Rixby stood on the controls next to Eckhart's elbow.

Odais pointed at a map of Vaebbe under Rixby's feet. "This is where the village was when I visited it. The other villages occupied these high points along the river."

"Those high points have less vegetation than the rest of the planet," Rixby remarked.

"That's why the Groras settled there. The plant life on Vaebbe is all carnivorous, and some of it is openly aggressive. The plants send out tendrils to hunt down prey, and some of them hunt big prey—Groras-sized prey. These plants have been known to snatch grown men in their sleep."

"It looks like most of the plant life grows well away from the river," Eckhart observed.

"They have to. The water is toxic. The plants soak up water that has filtered through the bedrock. You can see all the riverbanks are barren…and you see those stepping stones? The villagers never touched the water. The water can eat flesh from bone, and there are carnivorous animals living in the water, too."

"Wow," Eckhart breathed. "That is one hostile planet."

Something beeped under Rixby's feet. "We've located the plant in question. The animal is on the other side of that mountain range."

"Let's go. You stay here, Rixby. Keep the four battlecruisers on standby and alert the *Marathon* if any of the assets show up."

Eckhart and Odais got into the elevator and rode down to the landing platform. Alice, Innyria, Dallas, and Bing waited for them there along with Ephus, the enormous Iawei that Squids had assigned to be Eckhart's bodyguard.

Eckhart hadn't seen Dallas and the others rescue Ephus and the two Sadaat crewmen from Dhairi, either. He'd been barely conscious at the time. He'd thought they were all dead.

Ephus had become even more fanatical about guarding Eckhart than he was before his brothers died at Regiment hands. Ephus even insisted on guarding Eckhart on the *Atera*, where he was already

safe.

Ephus wouldn't be able to protect Eckhart from all of Vaebbe's dangers, but Eckhart didn't tell Ephus that. They all loaded into the *Marathon*, and Alice piloted the ship away from the *Atera*.

Eckhart didn't try to pilot the ship himself. He'd given this ship to Alice, and he still considered it hers, even when he borrowed it now and then.

She buzzed into the atmosphere and located the plant signals Rixby transmitted from the *Atera*. Eckhart frowned at the tactical grid. "They're tiny!"

"You'll need quite a few samples," Odais replied. "The plants don't produce much juice, but it's very potent."

"All right. Let's go. Keep your eyes open," Eckhart told everyone. "We don't know half of what's waiting to kill us down here."

Everybody stopped by the weapons locker on the way to the cargo hold, but when they got outside, the whole landscape lay silent and unmoving in every direction. Eckhart scanned the horizon. Besides being mostly desert with a few scrubby patches of thorny bushes, he didn't see anything here he hadn't seen on dozens of other planets.

The group crossed the stepping stones the way Odais told them to. Rixby guided Dallas through his helmet, and the party passed through a dusty expanse to some twisted, leafless trees near the mountains.

Alice, Innyria, Dallas, and Ephus stood guard in a semi-circle while Odais, Eckhart, and Bing went into the trees. Odais pointed to some blobs waving on stalks at the base of the trees. "That's them. The juice is in those balls."

Eckhart tugged on a pair of gloves reinforced with Kesmite fibers. He pulled out the Ioscesten case Rixby had given him.

Odais scanned the area while Eckhart plucked a bunch of the balls. They fizzed, and wads of bubbly goo came out of them when he dropped them into the case. Heat radiated through his gloves, and the plants gave off a putrid smell.

He was starting to feel lightheaded when he finally put the impervious cover on the case and stood up. They made it back to the *Marathon* without incident, and Alice lifted off.

"One down, one to go," Dallas murmured. "It'll be a miracle if we get off this planet without one of the natives attacking us."

Alice followed Rixby's directions over the mountains, and the whole crew looked down into bottomless vents in each summit. Creatures writhed down there, and puffs of toxic smoke billowed from the vents.

She finally swooped down into a deep valley surrounded by jagged ridges. "This is the place," Odais announced. "The creatures live here."

"There's an obscure entry in one of Rixby's records," Bing called from Rixby's old workstation. "The creatures are called Thalzu."

"Who cares what they're called? Look at that!" Alice banked the *Marathon* over a massive cone carved into the ground.

It must have been at least thirty feet wide, and as the ship passed over it, several giant tentacles slithered out, looped in the air, and made a grab for the *Marathon*.

"Watch out!" Eckhart yelled, but Alice was already dodging the thing and throttling the *Marathon* away from the crater.

"Be careful!" Bing called. "There's another one to starboard."

Alice skimmed around that one, too. The whole crew gaped down at the gigantic things seething under the ground. Dirt and dust shimmered down each cone, and moved with something enormous writhing beneath the surface.

"Are you saying," Eckhart choked, "that the Groras used the skin of *that*?"

Odais nodded. "They hunted those things. It was a rite of passage for the young men to participate in the hunt, and if they came back alive, they were considered men."

"I think I'll skip that ritual," Bing panted. "I'd rather be a boy all my life."

"How are we going to get it?" Innyria asked. "We can't exactly dump a load of Datrium down its throat, or we'd blow the skin apart."

"What about cutting off one of its limbs?" Ephus suggested. "Then we get the skin and weaken the thing at the same time."

"You have to use the skin around the body itself," Odais told him.

"You're making that up!" Bing cried. "You're just trying to make this as difficult as you possibly can. Admit it."

Odais smiled at him. "I'm just telling you what I know."

"All right," Eckhart sighed. "We have to find a way to kill it and get it out on the surface so we can get its skin."

“What about throwing a chain or a cable down into the hole, letting the thing grab it, and then pulling the whole creature out?” Innyria suggested.

Alice turned around and hissed at him. “You have *got* to be joking. It would drag the whole ship down.”

“There has to be a way,” Odais countered. “The Groras hunted those things with spears and clubs.”

“Which explains why the Groras had such an impressive reputation as warriors,” Dallas remarked.

“Unlike us,” Bing added.

“We can’t leave without that thing’s skin,” Eckhart decided. “Alice, why don’t you set us down on the mountain over there while we figure out what to—”

A flash cut him off. It blasted through the tactical grid, and everyone stared at a blazing ball of light streaking from the atmosphere to their position.

“Oh, great!” Bing groaned.

“Looks like we’re on the right track!” Alice roared and seized the regulators. “Whatever we’re gonna do to combine the plant juice with that creature, we should do it now!”

Eckhart turned to Odais. “Is there any way we can do that? Can we use both substances to defeat the assets?”

“I have no idea!” he countered. “The Groras used a complicated process to combine them. They didn’t just throw the plant down the creature’s throat and hope for the best.”

Eckhart turned back to the tactical grid, and his stomach dropped as the other three assets rocketed out of nowhere. All four converged on the *Marathon*, and lasers pelted the Celdian shields.

“Get us out of here, Alice!” Eckhart ordered.

“We can’t!” she fired back. “If we leave now, they’ll never let us near this planet again. We have to get the skin now!”

“We have no way to get the skin!”

Bing ran over to Eckhart. “Give me the plant! I’ll take it into the crater.”

“No damn way!” Eckhart bellowed. “We don’t even know if that will work.”

The first asset to arrive lashed out with an even more punishing barrage of lasers, and the *Marathon* staggered. It lurched a fraction of an inch nearer to one of the craters that Alice had dodged earlier.

Before she could correct, a winding tentacle snaked out of the

hole and caught hold of the *Marathon*. “Forget the assets!” Alice roared. “We’ve got a much bigger problem.”

The tentacle whipped the ship sideways, and everyone went flying. Eckhart slammed into the railing behind Alice’s chair and almost lost his hold on the glass case holding the plants.

He staggered back the other way and banged into the bulkhead. He teetered out to the infirmary and stashed the case in the biohazard containment unit. It would be safe in there, but he wouldn’t be.

Another devastating smack bowled him off his feet. He somersaulted out of the infirmary and smashed down hard on the floor outside.

He hauled himself hand over hand toward the bridge. He made it as far as the bulkhead before another crushing yank hurled him up into the ceiling. He came crashing down, missed the catwalk, and flew all the way down to the cargo hold.

Clangs and bangs rocked the ship. He heard Datrium streaking from the ship’s guns, but he couldn’t see anything down here.

He rolled onto his back and grabbed the pounder he’d been carrying when he came back from gathering the plant. The weapon had fallen on the floor next to him when he landed.

He picked it up and noticed the hatch was open. He was wondering what to do when Odais, Innyria, Dallas, and Bing all came charging down the stairs. “Get outside!” Odais yelled. “Hurry!”

They all barreled outside as one punishing strike after another pounded the ship. Alice spat Datrium at the assets in the air, and at the Thalzu’s tentacles whipping all over the place. The creature tried more than once to snatch the ship again, but Alice severed any limb that came too close.

She didn’t fare so well against the assets. They hovered high enough that Datrium didn’t reach them. They could rain lasers on the ship from out of range.

Dallas stormed around the *Marathon* and slotted out his assault guns. He unloaded on the assets, but he came up against the same problem. They were too far away.

He fired his jet boosters to soar nearer to them, but when he got fifteen feet off the ground, another tentacle hissed out of the crater and grabbed him.

“Dallas!” Eckhart roared.

The creature twirled Dallas in the midair, and the assets moved back to give the Thalzu plenty of room to devour him. Eckhart raced forward, but Innyria grabbed him and pulled him back. “No! You’ll fall down the crater!”

Eckhart fired upward, but only a few times. He didn’t want to hit Dallas—as if his pitiful guns could make a dent in Dallas’ armor.

Dallas fired his assault guns down into the hole, but nothing seemed to stop the thing. More tentacles slithered into view and started worming their way closer to the *Marathon* crew.

The *Marathon* stopped firing. It wasn’t doing any good anyway. Alice came charging outside, ran up to Innyria, and started yelling in his ear. Eckhart couldn’t hear her, but Innyria sure could. They held a rapid conversation that didn’t seem to be getting anybody anywhere.

Eckhart raised his weapon to his eye and sighted for the tentacle holding Dallas. It was nearly impossible to get a fix on it. It was moving too fast, and Dallas’ Datrium shots kept blocking Eckhart’s sight.

Another blast echoed out of nowhere, and the tentacle parted. Smoke billowed from Odais’ gun, and Dallas plummeted straight down toward the creature’s hole. He fired his jet boosters and flew far enough to the side to land on the crater’s crumbly rim. He teetered there for a second and then caught his balance.

The assets noticed and attacked in a flash. They swarmed in, hammering him with lasers, trying to knock him into the crater.

He spun around to return fire and toppled into the hole. “Dallas!” Eckhart bellowed, and this time, nothing stopped him from racing to the top.

He clawed his way through sand and slippery gravel to the crater’s rim. He had to let his weapon fall back against its strap, but he didn’t care. He slid on his stomach and peeked over the side.

Dallas lay stretched out on the sand about eight feet beneath the rim. Every laser strike from the assets made him slip a little lower.

“Hang on, buddy!” Eckhart rasped. “I’ll get you out!”

Dallas looked up at him. “Eckhart…” He raised his hand and fired his assault gun over Eckhart’s head. Something smashed behind him. Eckhart didn’t dare to look back.

He un-looped his weapon and extended the gun into the hole. “Grab on! I’ll pull you out.”

Dallas didn’t move. Every tremor going through the ground

caused another tiny avalanche of sand, sucking him down toward the Thalzu.

More tentacles cracked and hissed all over the place. They slapped the sides to knock Dallas lower. All at once, he lunged for the strap and grabbed hold. The tension on Eckhart's arm threatened to pull him in, too.

Another devastating laser punched into the sand right next to Eckhart's head. He peeked out from under his arms to see one of the assets hovering directly over the crater. A tentacle hit the asset's corona and bounced off.

Deep rumbles came from under the ground, and a cavernous pit opened at the very bottom of the cone. It descended into a black maw too horrible to imagine.

Eckhart looked away, searching for any way out of this mess. "Eckhart," Dallas murmured. "Let go."

"No!" Eckhart shrieked. "Just hang on! We'll get you out!"

"Eckhart—" Dallas began again, but a deafening shriek cut him off.

Pelting wind blasted sand into Eckhart's cheeks and eyes. He squinted up at the *Marathon*, inching nearer to the asset above Dallas' position.

More tentacles wrapped around the ship and threatened to tow it down into the Thalzu's mouth. The engines screeched at their maximum power to keep the ship airborne.

"No!" Eckhart thundered. "Pull back! Get away!"

No one answered him. What was Alice trying to do?

The asset turned to confront the ship. Whoever he was pulled his lasers away from Eckhart and Dallas.

The asset bombarded the *Marathon* with a catastrophic assault. Eckhart didn't want to look. He didn't want to see the ship go down on this God-forsaken planet.

The *Marathon* kept crawling one agonizing inch closer to the asset. The rifle strap cut into Eckhart's fingers as the vibrations hauled Dallas deeper into the cone. Eckhart couldn't hold on much longer.

The Thalzu's tentacles gouged into the *Marathon*'s hull, and the metal groaned and crunched under the pressure. The ship staggered to port and almost went down.

The asset unleashed a hellish rain of lasers unlike anything Eckhart had ever seen, and at that moment, the ship whipped

sideways.

Datrium belched from the ship's guns and severed two of the tentacles holding it. The ship pinwheeled backward, and Eckhart's jaw dropped when he saw that the hatch was hanging open.

Alice stood just inside the ramp, and she was holding something in her Kesmite-gloved hand. At that moment when the hatch faced the asset, a bone-shaking explosion went off inside the cargo hold. Alice took a flying leap, and the explosion hurled her through space.

She collided with the asset, and Dallas let go of the rifle strap. He flipped onto his back and fired a cable from his arm prosthetic. The cable snaked around the asset's ankle, and Dallas yanked with all his might. Gravity caught Alice and the asset, and they dropped together into the Thalzu's mouth.

The mouth closed on them, and a muffled thump sounded under the ground. The shudder disturbed the sand, and Dallas slid the rest of the way down the cone's sides. He landed on his feet on the armored plates protecting the Thalzu's mouth.

The tentacles holding the *Marathon* slackened and slapped down on the ground. They didn't move again.

The remaining three assets hovered in the sky above the mountains. They didn't fire. They stared down at the crater. The whole landscape went dangerously quiet and still.

Eckhart stared down at the black plates underneath Dallas' feet. He couldn't force his brain to believe what he'd just witnessed. It couldn't have happened. It couldn't have. He kept thinking there must be some way to wind back the clock and what really happened would take the place of that sight burned into his eyes for all time.

The *Marathon* landed on the mountainside and Innyria came out of the hatch. He didn't come down to where the rest of the crew stood. Tears streaked his face, and he tried to turn away before going back to staring toward the crater.

Bing stood off to one side, frozen in shock. He, Dallas, and Eckhart kept staring down into the hole. Alice couldn't be down there. She couldn't be. She had to still be on the *Marathon*. How could she be anywhere else?

Eckhart couldn't look anymore. His eyes hurt. He rolled onto his back and flung his arm across his face.

In a few minutes, that image would go away. He would get up

and go over to the *Marathon*. He would find Alice sitting in her usual place, ready to fly the crew back to the *Atera*.

Nothing happened. None of the assets opened fire again. Why didn't they attack to kill the crew that robbed them of their friend?

Someone touched Eckhart's shoulder. It was Dallas. "Get up, Eckhart."

Eckhart put his arm down. No part of him was working.

Dallas grabbed Eckhart's arm and pulled him to his feet. Eckhart couldn't feel his legs.

Dallas guided him down the slope and left him standing next to Bing and Innyria.

The *Marathon* was doing something. Eckhart couldn't tell what it was. He barely registered when the ship floated over the crater, dropped a cable down to the Thalzu's mouth, and then hoisted an absolutely massive monster out of the sand.

Eckhart didn't want to see. He turned away and walked up the mountain. He didn't stop until he found a place overlooking where the Groras villages used to be.

He didn't want to go back to the *Atera*. He didn't want to go on with this rebellion. He didn't care anymore about capturing or even killing the remaining three assets.

Which one of them had died today? Was it Jenks or Fontana? Did it really matter?

Nothing seemed to matter. Eckhart couldn't think of anything but going back to the part of his day with Alice in it. His mind kept floundering for some way to correct what was all wrong with the world.

Dallas came hiking up the hill and squatted down next to Eckhart. He didn't say anything for a long time. Maybe a mechanical man like Dallas could keep taking care of business after today.

Eckhart wasn't that man. He could let go of the *Marathon* as long as he knew Alice was out there somewhere. The universe still worked properly as long as she was still flying around making nasty remarks about him.

"Eckhart," Dallas murmured, "I wouldn't bother you right now, but Innyria needs you. He's hurting. He needs you to go talk to him."

Eckhart rounded on his friend. "You knew! You knew what she was going to do! How could you pull her into that hole like that?

You killed her! How could you? She was supposed to be your *friend*, Dallas."

"I didn't know what she was going to do until she did it. I had no idea she was going to jump and grab the asset—and before you say I killed her, you might want to use the brain God gave you and realize that if I didn't pull her into the Thalzu's mouth, the asset would have killed her and her sacrifice would have been for nothing. She wouldn't have been able to pull the asset into the Thalzu's mouth on her own. The asset would have destroyed her and then all four of them would have come after us."

Eckhart turned away, fighting down the lump in his throat. He couldn't see Innyria like this, or he would break down completely.

Only Dallas would be able to stand under an accusation like that and let it slide. Only he could forgive an insult like that.

Dallas stood up and squeezed Eckhart's shoulder. "Your crew needs you, Eckhart. Alice gave her life for this cause. Now it's your turn."

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9

Eckhart finally turned around and gazed down into the valley where the Thalzu lived. Dallas, Bing, Odais, and Ephus were working to skin the Thalzu that Alice had killed. Eckhart didn't see Innyria anywhere.

Eckhart couldn't go down there. He couldn't face the consequences of what had just happened. Why did it have to be her? Why couldn't it be one of the others? Why couldn't it be Bing or Dallas—or Odais or Innyria?

He hated himself for even thinking that. Alice. His friend. His partner. His crew. He lived and suffered with these people. The world wasn't worth spit without them. None of this meant anything.

He started walking. He didn't care about Dallas or Bing or Innyria. He didn't care about any aliens or the Regiment or the rebellion. He wanted to die. He actually considered walking into one of the other Thalzu holes. That would be better than seeing Innyria right now.

Eckhart headed back to the *Marathon*. He didn't know what he planned to do, because he didn't plan to do anything. He planned to sit in his old cabin and stare at the wall for a while. Hell, maybe he would stare at it for the rest of eternity.

Rixby could take over the rebellion. She'd been handling it for weeks anyway. She was better at it than he was.

He walked into the cargo hold. Halfanite burns blackened the ship's interior, and the equipment and supply lockers had blown open. Most of the supplies were ruined, but who cared?

He climbed the stairs, but when he turned toward his quarters, he noticed the bridge standing open. Was Innyria in there?

He tiptoed over to the door, and his head swam between vertigo and déjà vu. His mind played a trick on him, and he actually expected to see Alice sitting at the controls.

She wasn't. She would never sit there again. She would never pilot this ship again. Eckhart would abandon the ship here in this wretched place, but it was his only way to get away from the place where she'd died.

The next instant, his brain switched gears and he thought he saw

Innyria sitting at the navigation station.

Eckhart's wishful thinking half-hoped he would see Innyria adjusting and fine-tuning the ship's instruments the way Alice used to. That was her way of dealing with frustration and upset—usually frustration and upset at Eckhart. She vented her anger by working on the ship the same way he did.

Innyria wasn't there, either. He wouldn't be. He didn't deal with tragedy that way. So where was he?

Eckhart went back outside, and when he saw Dallas and the others working on the Thalzu, he finally understood what Dallas had been telling him.

Someone needed him more than he needed himself. Someone was hurting worse than he was. Someone needed him to pull them out of this despair.

Eckhart crossed the hillside, and Dallas looked up from his work. He tilted his helmet slightly toward the south and then went back to what he was doing.

Eckhart didn't need to see any more. He headed in that direction and spotted Innyria squatting alone on a different ridge.

Eckhart walked up behind him and placed a hand on Innyria's shoulder, but couldn't think of anything to say to him. No words expressed this vacuum in the world where Alice used to be.

Eckhart swallowed hard to get his voice working. He didn't think it was possible for anyone to care more about Alice than the *Marathon* crew, but Innyria did. He and Alice had come to mean more to each other in a few weeks than the *Marathon* crew ever had.

What could Eckhart say to comfort Innyria for that when he didn't even understand what was going on between them? Alice treated Innyria with the same hostile venom she used on everyone, but it only endeared him to her more. Every hateful thing she ever said brought them closer together.

Eckhart couldn't touch that. He dwelled outside in the cold and the dark, while they lived in a bubble of closeness reserved only for themselves.

Without warning, Innyria said, "There's an Earthling down there, Eckhart."

Eckhart blinked, and his brain went into a tailspin again. Innyria wasn't crying. He wasn't upset at all. He gazed down the other side of the mountain toward the river.

“Uh…what?”

Innyria pointed toward a stand of sparse trees beyond the river. “There’s an Earthling down there. He’s looking right at us.”

Eckhart frowned at Innyria. Was Innyria really talking about that, right after Alice died?

“He’s been there since I got up here. I think he’s waiting for us… for you.”

Eckhart scowled down into the valley. He couldn’t see any Earthling, and he actually wondered if there was any Earthling down there at all. Maybe Innyria had cracked his nut from grief. Maybe he was seeing things.

No, Eckhart was the one seeing things. He was seeing Alice at the *Marathon*’s controls and then seeing Innyria in places where he wasn’t. Eckhart was the one who kept thinking he could roll back time and redo today until he got a memory more to his liking.

“Are you going to see what he wants?” Innyria asked.

What the hell? Why not? What else did Eckhart have to do besides stand around staring reality in the face?

He started walking, but none of this made sense. Things should have come apart more than this.

Dallas, Odais, and Bing shouldn’t be up there dissecting the Thalzu like this was an everyday occurrence. Innyria shouldn’t be telling Eckhart to go find out what some mythical Earthling wanted.

He saw movement when he got near the trees. There really was an Earthling there, and when Eckhart reached the shelter of the dry leaves, he found Nuñez waiting for him.

Nuñez backed deeper under the trees. He kept casting furtive glances to both sides and up toward the ridge, like he expected someone to come out and grab him.

“What can I do for you?” Eckhart began. “Did you want to see me?”

Nuñez looked past Eckhart’s shoulder again. “I have to tell you something.”

“What—that you just killed my friend? Thanks a lot.”

“She killed my friend, too. Your boy pulled Jenks into that thing’s mouth.”

Eckhart compressed his lips. “Is there some reason we’re standing out here instead of me going back to my fleet and getting my people to hunt you down and kill you?”

Nuñez fidgeted some more. “I want to turn.”

Eckhart shut his eyes and shook his head fast. “You what?”

“You said you wanted us to turn. Here I am.”

“Just like that? What about the other two?”

Nuñez kept squirming and twisting inside his clothes. He glanced over his shoulder at nothing. “They don’t know I’m here.”

“Where are they?” Eckhart demanded.

Nuñez jerked his thumb behind him. “They’re over there trying to decide what to do about Jenks.”

“Let me guess. They’re trying to decide what to do about you, too.”

“Uh…yeah. They said they’d kill me if I didn’t come back.”

“Let me get this straight,” Eckhart began again. “You could take their power anytime you want to. You could kill them in their sleep, and you’re worried about them killing you if you don’t come back.”

“They say I’m a traitor for even mentioning turning to the alien side.”

Eckhart snorted. “I hate to be the one to break it to you, pal, but you and your buddies are already so far away from working for the Regiment that you might as well come over to our side. I can’t guarantee your safety, but you stand a much better chance with us than you do with the Regiment. Even a lowlife like you must realize that.”

Nuñez shuffled his feet some more. “You’re right. This is all wrong. It’s bound to end badly for us. Our only chance is to join the aliens now before things go against us.”

“So what are you going to do about your friends? They’ll come after you if you go with us.”

“I know.” Nuñez looked up at the ridge again. “What about your friends? They’ll kill me if I go up there.”

“Actually, they won’t. They believe in this cause, and we need you too much. If you come with me now, I promise no one who’s on the ship right now will harm you. I won’t say they don’t hate you, but they won’t try to kill you. Once we get back to the *Atera*, I should be able to protect you from the Regiment.”

“What about the other boys?”

“You tell me. How do you say we should protect you from them?”

Nuñez shrugged at nothing. “I don’t know.”

Eckhart sighed. Nuñez was the last thing in the known universe he wanted to think about right now. “All right. Come on.”

He hiked up the hill back to where he'd left Innyria. Innyria glared at Nuñez, but didn't say anything.

Eckhart took Nuñez to his old quarters and waved inside. "You can wait here. I'll come and get you when we reach the *Atera*."

He shut the door on the man. Now that his head had cleared slightly, he started to realize what a massive task Nuñez had just presented to him.

Just in case he wasn't quite sure how the whole alien rebellion was going to feel about this man, Eckhart found Dallas, Bing, Odais, and Innyria all waiting for him in the cargo hold. The first three were covered in some kind of black slime, but Eckhart didn't see the Thalzu skin anywhere. He didn't want to ask.

The four men glared at Eckhart with so much obvious malice that Eckhart guessed instantly what they wanted to talk to him about.

"You've got some nerve bringing that son of a bitch on board this ship," Innyria snarled.

"I know," Eckhart groaned.

"Are you taking him back to the fringe population to face execution?" Odais demanded. "Please say you are."

"I wish I was. I really do."

"You can't seriously plan to keep him with us," Dallas pointed out. "Do you have any idea what the rest of the fleet will say when you show up with him?"

"I think I have a pretty good idea," Eckhart murmured.

"This idea of yours of taking him back to Earth is madness, Eckhart," Bing informed him. "It's a fantasy."

"It wasn't a fantasy to get one or all of them to turn," Eckhart pointed out. "Maybe now that D'Alia and Fontana are alone, they'll be more likely to turn."

"And maybe they won't," Odais countered. "Maybe they'll become even more dangerous."

"This guy is the only weapon we have that's strong enough to kill them or neutralize them," Innyria added. "If you send him out to fight the other assets, they could kill him first, and then all of this will be for nothing."

"Unless you originally planned to use him to neutralize them," Bing suggested. "If that was your plan all along, it might work if there weren't two of them and one of him."

"We didn't come to this planet to use him to neutralize them,"

Eckhart told them all. “We just lost Alice getting that thing’s skin so we could salvage as many of these assets as possible.”

“Salvage!” Odais spat. “Do you have the first clue how many of my people he killed? I was there. He killed thousands of them right in front of me. He deserves to die.”

“I know he does, but if he—” Eckhart began.

“This is pointless.” Innyria spun away. “You’re unreasonable, Eckhart. You don’t know what’s important. I can’t work with you anymore.”

He stalked off to the bridge, and Odais followed him. A second later, the engines fired up. Innyria didn’t wait for the other four to move before he started closing the hatch.

“He has a point. You really need to think this over and decide whether this course might not be the best thing for the rebellion after all.” Bing walked away and headed for the infirmary. “You’re gonna lose everything you’ve worked for if you keep going this way.”

Only Dallas remained. He stared down at Eckhart. “Well?” Eckhart asked. “Aren’t you going to tell me how this plan is some misguided ploy to get Earth’s attention?”

Dallas studied him for a long time. The engine noise coming through the hull rose to a howl as the ship left Vaebbe’s orbit.

In the end, Dallas said nothing. He veered around Eckhart, opened the door to Eckhart’s old quarters, and went inside, shutting himself in with Nuñez.

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10

Eckhart couldn't bear to go back to the bridge, so he went to the galley instead. He sat down at the table and pretended to check his weapon.

He honestly didn't give a flat shit anymore what happened to Nuñez or the rebellion or anyone on the *Marathon*. This whole thing had spiraled way out of control.

Where did he go wrong? Things weren't too bad when the *Marathon* left Sorix, but it all went sideways long before that. It went wrong before he got Akkek Stratha out of the Silvercloud Vault. It went wrong when he picked up Clifton and DeWalt on OSMZ.

Everything that had happened seemed to lead to everything else. He shouldn't have taken over Aistenz Trotaer's empire, but the Regiment probably would have unleashed these assets on the fringes already if he hadn't.

Aistenz's empire was the only thing standing between the fringes and destruction, but not even that made Eckhart feel better. He'd gladly trade all the billions of alien lives on the fringes just to get Alice back.

No one came to bother him in the galley. Eckhart didn't want to know what Dallas was saying to Nuñez in that cabin.

Eckhart didn't blame Odais and Innyria for wanting Nuñez dead. He felt the same way. Only this automatic, mechanical life of his kept him going. He didn't have to feel anything.

The *Marathon* banged once, and then again. It was back on board the *Atera*, and now he had to go back to functioning. He had to think and decide things. Everyone would be looking to him to decide everything.

He felt sick to his stomach when he thought about Rixby. How was he supposed to face her and tell Rixby about Alice? He'd rather go back to Vaebbe and stay there as long as his miserable life lasted than explain what had happened.

He couldn't do that. He had to deal with Nuñez. He went up to his quarters and found Dallas standing guard outside. "I've decided you're right, Eckhart. Turning these guys is our best option."

Eckhart raised his eyebrows. “When did you decide that?”

“I’ve been thinking about it a lot, and I just talked to Nuñez.”

“What did he say to convince you?”

“It wasn’t anything he said. It was more the fact that he’s an Earthling.”

“I don’t understand what you mean. What does him being an Earthling have to do with anything?” Eckhart asked.

“I’m not sure, but I think you’re right. Taking these guys back to Earth is our best way to stop the Regiment.”

“If it works, you mean.” Eckhart stepped around him and opened the door.

Nuñez stood up from where he was sitting on the bunk. He looked as nervous as he had on Vaebbe.

“We’re on the *Atera*,” Eckhart announced. “If you come with me, we’ll work out what we’re going to do next.”

“Just don’t ask me to go out against D’Alia and Fontana. I couldn’t do that.”

“I wasn’t going to suggest that. Now come on. I’m going to take you somewhere that you can stay. You’ll be around other Earthlings until you get used to being on a ship crewed by all aliens.”

Nuñez’s color drained, but Eckhart didn’t wait for him to pull it together. He went back outside and led Nuñez down to the hatch. Dallas went with them, but he split off to do something else.

“Where are the guys who were with you when you came to visit us in the forest?” Nuñez asked.

“They’re here,” Eckhart replied over his shoulder. “I’ll tell them you’re here. They can help you get settled in here.”

“How did they wind up here?”

“I’ll let them explain that to you.” Eckhart stepped out onto the landing platform, and Nuñez moved closer to him when he saw the place crawling with aliens.

The *Atera*’s mechanics and engineers came forward to service the *Marathon*. Eckhart spotted Squids approaching to talk to him, but Eckhart waved him away.

Eckhart turned toward the elevator, and came face to face with Innyria. Innyria’s skin hung off his bones, and he looked suddenly ancient. His eyes stared out of empty sockets with a dull, lifeless glaze. Eckhart had never seen him like this before—ever.

“I’m leaving, Eckhart. I’m finished.”

“Yeah. Okay.” Some part of Eckhart expected this. “I

understand. Take the *Marathon*. I gave it to Alice, but you should have it."

"No." Innyria shot a hateful glare past Eckhart toward the ship "I don't want the *Marathon*. I want to take a Velocity."

"Sure. Take whatever you need. I know you don't want to work with me anymore, but—"

At that moment, the elevator opened again and Rixby waddled out. She crossed the landing platform and went inside the *Marathon*'s hatch.

Eckhart froze. He should go in there. He should be the one to tell her, or at least be there when Dallas or Bing told her, but Innyria stopped him.

"It isn't that." Innyria covered his eyes and then grimaced at the *Marathon* again. "I just couldn't…I couldn't fly the ship again. It would bring back too many memories."

"Okay," Eckhart breathed. "I understand. I'm sorry things didn't work out."

Innyria fixed him with a hard stare and snarled through gritted teeth. "You do what you feel is right, Eckhart. I don't have any reason to complain about what you do. I just…" He waved at nothing. "I can't do this. Not without Alice. I don't know, I need to figure out what I'm going to do."

"Okay, man." Eckhart tried to swallow down the lump in his throat, but it refused to go away. "I understand. I really do. I wish I could leave, too. I wish I could go off somewhere and figure out what I'm going to do about this…without her."

Once he said it, the black pocket of despair boiling inside him threatened to explode. He couldn't stand this a second longer.

The next instant, a piercing scream echoed across the landing platform. It set Eckhart's hair on end and his world started to implode.

Before he could move, Innyria grabbed him and pulled him into a hug, crushing him in a bone-pulverizing grip.

Everything came apart at the seams. Eckhart didn't know what to do. He didn't even seem to be able to stand on his own. He would have fallen over if Innyria wasn't holding him so tight.

Innyria let him go, and tears stood in his eyes again. He squeezed Eckhart's shoulder and walked away toward the Velocities.

Squids took the opportunity to approach for the second time, but

Eckhart didn't stay to find out what he wanted. There was only one place in the universe where Eckhart belonged right now.

He left Squids and Nuñez standing next to each other. Nuñez looked as petrified as ever, but Eckhart couldn't help him with that.

Eckhart climbed back up into the *Marathon*'s cargo hold. Dallas and Bing stood there together, alone except for Rixby.

She huddled against Dallas' armored shin, rocking and sobbing while Dallas fiddled with the fur on her head. Bing stared down at her, and didn't look up when Eckhart arrived.

Eckhart moved over to them, and stopped. There was nothing to say. There was nothing to do but stand here and feel the wretched black emptiness. That emptiness encompassed the whole galaxy now that Alice wasn't in it.

As soon as they left the *Marathon*, each of them would go off somewhere else. Bing would go to the medical bay and Rixby would go to the bridge. Dallas would probably go back to commanding Eckhart's ground troops. They would never be a crew again.

Alice had been the glue holding them all together. How was it possible that they'd been together all these years and never realized that? How could Eckhart not realize it?

He might have stood here for hours. He couldn't tell. Was Innyria already gone? Did it matter anymore?

Everything the *Marathon* was would never be again. Whatever'd held the crew together all these years was already gone.

Ultimately, he knew this grief would be turned to righteous anger. Someone would be made to pay. But that was for later.

Squids came over to the hatch and looked in at the four friends. He waved Eckhart toward him. He must want to know what to do with Nuñez, but Eckhart didn't move. He went back to facing Dallas and Bing. He didn't want anything to take him away from them—not yet.

Squids only waited a second, and then strode into the hold. He marched right up to Eckhart's side and murmured in his ear. "You need to get to the bridge. It's an emergency."

Great. Another emergency. Eckhart didn't want to go, but he had to. He turned away, and the flimsy cord holding him to his friends snapped. He was adrift in this sea of nothing.

He followed Squids to the elevator. Eckhart didn't even ask what the problem was, and Squids didn't volunteer anything.

Eckhart stepped out of the elevator, and his stomach dropped

into his shoes when he beheld the biggest Regiment force he'd seen yet. It took up the entire Hydra sector. It dwarfed even the force the Regiment had brought out to confront the alien army at Inoash.

The Regiment had brought out hundreds of Stormbreakers and what looked like thousands of Colossuses and Banshees. They had also floated much larger ships—larger even than the Stormbreakers.

These leviathans made the Stormbreakers look puny, but they could maneuver easily. They rotated their position in the phalanx to confront an alien horde beyond Eckhart's worst nightmares.

None of the alien vessels came close to the Stormbreakers or the Leviathans in size, but they outnumbered the Regiment by what looked like millions. Eckhart didn't even recognize most of them.

"Who are they?" he choked. "Who's doing this?"

"It's no one we know," Squids told him. "The Jackal Clan, the Chosen, and the Immortals are all denying that any of their people are involved. Even Ulnus is too far behind the line to join in. We don't know who they are or where they came from."

Eckhart shuddered as the truth sank in. "They're renegades."

"They're hardly renegades," Squids replied. "They're aliens. This rebellion has morphed into something beyond our control. The aliens are taking matters into their own hands. You can't stop them now, Eckhart. No one can stop them."

At those words, someone on the Regiment side fired into the alien swarm, and the reaction came instantaneously. None of the alien ships moved or returned fire. They didn't have to.

An invisible wave broke across the Regiment line. It looked nothing like the crawling black of Silent Death. This looked more like a straight front of destruction slicing into the Regiment force. Nothing stood against it.

The forwardmost Banshees crumbled in place. They didn't explode as though they'd been shot. They just dissolved.

Engine parts and hull plates detached from their positions and rotated off into space. Screws unscrewed and bolts slipped out of place. Each ship fell apart piece by piece until nothing but a vast debris field remained.

The line glided through the ranks. It consumed the Banshees and reached the Colossuses without stopping.

The Stormbreakers and Leviathans fired into the debris field, but there was nothing to hit but more space trash spreading wider in the wake of devastation.

Eckhart struggled to breathe watching this. His brain kept screaming, *No! Stop! Don't!*

No one heard him, or if they did, they didn't listen. He really must be going insane if this happened.

The wave reached the Stormbreakers, and he couldn't watch anymore. He charged for the elevator and paced around the car until it reached the landing platform. He had to do something. He couldn't let this happen.

He pounded up the ramp and found Dallas, Bing, and Rixby right where he'd left them. Dallas and Bing both looked up at him. They were still so upset about Alice that they didn't know what was going on.

Eckhart grabbed Rixby and shook her. "Rixby! You have to stop Yausqith! You're the only one who can communicate with him! Stop him before it's too late!"

She screamed and tried to struggle out of his grip, but he didn't let her go. "Stop him, Rixby! You're the only person he listens to! You have to stop him. If he gets through the Regiment, he'll go all the way to Earth."

"I can't stop him!" she screamed. "He won't listen to me! He hates me!"

"Rixby!" Eckhart thundered. The insanity of the last few hours threatened to snap him. "You have to stop him! Do you realize what will happen if he doesn't stop now?"

"I can't!" she screeched. "He won't even talk to me anymore! Don't you think I've *tried*?"

Eckhart stared at her. He couldn't be hearing this. He couldn't have lost control of Yausqith, too.

He staggered backward. Dallas and Bing stared at him like he really had lost his mind. Eckhart stumbled across the landing platform. He could only think of one way to stop this.

He couldn't take the time to ride the elevator, so he raced up the stairs. He dashed down the corridor and pounded on several doors on both sides. "Clifton! DeWalt! Open up! Hurry up! It's a matter of life and death!"

Clifton stuck his head out. "What's going on?"

"Get ready to go! We're leaving." Eckhart ran to another door and beat on it until his fists ached. "Get out here, Martin! Come on, Jacob! We're leaving! We're going to Earth!"

Clifton and DeWalt gaped at him with the same pitying

expressions. Just then, Nuñez stuck his head out of another compartment. “What’s going on?”

“You have to come, too, Nuñez,” Eckhart panted. “Come on, all of you! Hurry up! We don’t have much time.”

Eckhart herded them toward the elevator. It would take precious minutes, but he had to do this. It was the only avenue left to him.

The elevator opened, and Squids came out of it. “They told me you were here. What are you doing?”

“Get on the communications system, Squids. Get Rixby up to the bridge as soon as she’s able and start transmitting emergency messages toward Earth and every other Earthling colony and Regiment station the aliens haven’t already destroyed. Tell them there’s a rogue alien force heading their way, and *do not* send out the Regiment to defend against it. Tell them to retreat as far as Earth if they have to. Warn them that any Regiment vessel that stands against this force will be destroyed and will only make the attack worse. Can you handle that?”

Squids studied him with his sightless black eye sockets. “Are you sure?”

“Go, Squids!” Eckhart bellowed. “It’s a matter of life and death! Get transmitting now!”

Eckhart had to go all the way back down the corridor to get the five Earthlings to come with him. They all stood outside their quarters staring at him like he was the one rampaging through the galaxy.

“Come on! We have to go now!”

“Where are we going?” Short asked.

“I told you. We’re going to Earth. We have to stop the Regiment from standing against Yausqith.”

“Who’s Yausqith?” Staton asked.

“Don’t ask.” Eckhart shoved them all into the elevator, but not before Short got his pants and put them on. He’d been asleep in his shorts when Eckhart woke him up.

The other five kept exchanging concerned glances on their way downstairs. They followed him much too slowly when he hustled over to the *Marathon*. Dallas, Bing, and Rixby were still there, but Eckhart didn’t try to talk to her again. She was too distraught.

“You two go back to the *Atera*,” he told Dallas and Bing. “Take Rixby with you. We need her on the bridge.”

“Where are you going?” Dallas asked.

“He says we’re going to Earth,” Clifton replied.

“So soon?” Bing asked. “I thought—”

“Yausqith is on the rampage,” Eckhart explained. “It looks like he isn’t interested in winning the rebellion anymore—or not in that way. He’s out there destroying everything in his path.”

“Who’s Yausqith?” Staton asked again.

“Don’t ask,” Bing replied.

“I just did.”

“Yausqith is an alien,” Dallas told him. “That’s all you need to know about him.”

“That’s all anyone knows about him,” Bing added.

“I wasn’t planning to leave so soon, but I guess I have no choice.” Eckhart picked up Rixby and pushed her into Dallas’ arms. “Go on. I don’t know if I can stop him, but I have to try.”

“Let me come with you,” Dallas offered. “You might need me.”

“I’m sure I will, but the Regiment sentries need to see a ship manned entirely by Earthlings. I’m sorry, man. I can’t take you.”

Dallas nodded, and Eckhart couldn’t wait any longer. He charged up to the bridge and dropped into his old seat. It seemed like eons since he’d piloted the *Marathon*, but it had only been a matter of weeks.

He fired up the engines and made sure Squids, Dallas, Bing, and Rixby were well out of range. Staton, Clifton, DeWalt, Nuñez, and Short got on board, and Eckhart launched.

He no longer held out any hope of preventing the whole-scale annihilation of the Regiment force in the Hydra sector. Nothing could stop that. He could only try to stop as much loss of life as possible.

He switched on the tactical grid and brought up the feed from the Hydra sector as soon as he got clear of the *Atera*. There was nothing left but debris as far as the eye could see. The others stood around the bridge, staring at chairs, sections of pounders, and torn hunks of metal. Eckhart eased the *Marathon* between them. The field had spread, and kept on spreading as all the pieces floated off into space.

Eckhart did his best not to think about it. He scanned ahead for any sign that the Regiment was arming again. Knowing them, they’d just keep sending out bigger and bigger armies to fight the aliens. That was the worst thing they could do.

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11

DeWalt shook Eckhart awake. “We’re entering the Kilos system. There’s a transmission coming in from the Regiment. They’re asking to speak to you. It sounds like word has spread that you’re on this ship.”

Eckhart put his feet on the floor and rubbed his face. “What time is it?”

“You’ve been asleep for thirty-six hours.”

“Any sign of Yausqith?”

“Nothing yet. The horde that attacked the Hydra sector is still behind the fleet line. They haven’t amassed again.”

“That’s something, at least.”

Eckhart followed DeWalt out of his quarters. He heard voices coming from the galley. Everyone on board sounded relaxed, including Nuñez, so that was another blessing.

Eckhart flopped into his chair and switched on the regulators. The transmission DeWalt mentioned was labeled. *Priority communique: Rear Admiral Enoch Mitchell.*

“He can be admiral of my rear,” Eckhart muttered, and DeWalt laughed.

Eckhart opened the communique. He wasn’t expecting much.

A youngish man with trimmed brown hair appeared on the regulators. He didn’t look old enough to shave. “The United Collateral Regiment General Staff sends greetings and well-wishes to the leader of the alien uprising.”

“Who the hell is this chump?” Eckhart sneered. “Who the hell does he think he’s sending greetings and well-wishes? We’re at war, dumbass.”

“He’s probably trying to pacify you by being polite,” DeWalt translated.

“Nice try, pal.” Eckhart started the message again. “Don’t try so hard next time.”

“The Regiment wishes to parlay with you regarding terms for the Regiment’s unconditional surrender. If you agree, kindly meet me and my staff on the planet Rumnu in the Uceds system. If you require any security assurances, please contact me on this

transmission relay to arrange the same."

"What damn language is this dude speaking? Who does he think he's talking to?"

"Aliens, maybe," DeWalt replied. "Here's guessing he didn't get the memo that the aliens who destroyed their force in the Hydra sector weren't under your control."

"I don't think any Earthling cares about that."

"So are you gonna go meet him?" DeWalt asked. "That will slow us down."

"What does he want to parlay about? 'Unconditional surrender' usually means not sending out massive formations to fight the aliens."

"It sounds like diplomatic-speak for a giant waste of time," DeWalt remarked. "You said you wanted to take Nuñez and Short to Earth to stop the Regiment from doing whatever it is they're doing. Talking to this guy won't accomplish that."

"You're right, but if he's that anxious to talk to me, maybe I should go. Maybe he can tell the rest of the Earthlings that I'm not responsible for all this other shit that Yausqith is doing."

"Do you really want to take that chance? Technically, you *are* responsible for it. Rixby called Yausqith out to help us against the assets."

"We wouldn't have had to call out Yausqith if the Regiment didn't create these assets in the first place."

"I'm pretty sure the Earthlings will blame you either way. Explaining to this dude that you don't control Yausqith won't change their opinion."

"You're right." Eckhart grabbed the regulators and altered course to head for the meeting point, but when he got nearer, he noticed several Banshees in orbit.

"It looks like a trap," DeWalt pointed out.

Eckhart started to pull away. "My thoughts exactly."

The instant he retreated, the Banshees broke orbit and howled toward him with their guns blazing.

DeWalt sprang over to Rixby's old workstation. "It is a trap!"

"I got that, pal!" Eckhart hit the throttle, but the Banshees overtook the *Marathon* in a second. They scattered Datrium into the *Marathon*'s path, and Eckhart had to dodge their shots.

"I don't think they want to offer terms for the Regiment's unconditional surrender," DeWalt called.

“What did that asshole say his name was?”

“Rear Admiral Enoch Mitchell!”

“Remind me never to believe anything he ever says again.”

“Do you still want to go to Earth?”

Just then, Clifton and Staton came in. “What’s going on?”

“We’re getting shot at!” DeWalt yelled back.

“And so are they!” Eckhart unloaded on the enemy, and more Datrium shots hammered the Celdian shields.

Eckhart pulled a rapid pirouette in midair, nailed three Banshees right behind him, wheeled to the front, and sprinted away while the pursuit still scrambled to correct.

“The Norobos system is just ahead!” DeWalt informed him. “Atis Station is there.”

“You can’t go there!” Staton protested. “They’ll gun us down.”

“What difference does it make?” Eckhart sped up, leading the way to the station. All the Banshees crowded around the *Marathon*, trying to bombard it to smithereens, but the Celdian held.

Eckhart pulled up the sentry crossing for Atis Station. “Mayday, mayday! We are on a diplomatic mission between the alien uprising and the people of Earth. Call off your Banshees! I repeat—we are on a diplomatic mission carrying five Earthlings between the alien leadership and Earth. Call off your Banshees!”

A high female voice bounced back. “Stand down, unidentified Banshees! Do not intrude on Regiment space or we will open fire.”

Eckhart froze. Had he heard that wrong?

“Unidentified Banshees, this is your last warning. *Do not* enter Atis Station airspace. Diplomatic vessel—you are clear to proceed through the sentry crossing. Lead the Banshees through the crossing and we will defend your arrival.”

“Well, I’ll be damned!” Clifton muttered.

“What the hell are they doing?” Staton asked.

“Who cares?” Eckhart gunned the *Marathon* straight for the crossing, but the Banshees completely ignored the sentry’s warning. They kept spitting shots at the *Marathon* all the way to the crossing. The massive ground guns on the planet opened up even before Eckhart made it through.

Gargantuan Datrium jets erupted from the surface and scattered amongst the pursuing Banshees. Several exploded as the *Marathon* skidded into the atmosphere.

“You are clear to proceed, diplomatic vessel,” the same woman

repeated. “We’re sending word down the line that you’re coming through.”

“Did something just happen?” Staton asked. “Did she just say we’re clear to proceed?”

“Maybe the Regiment is ready to surrender after all,” DeWalt suggested.

“Let’s not start fantasizing about something that’s never going to happen,” Clifton returned. “We have a long way to go before we’re done.”

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12

Eckhart stood up and started to leave the bridge. “I’m going back to sleep. Wake me up when we reach Earth.”

“You could be an old man by then,” Clifton teased.

“Then I’ll be ready to go to bed permanently. Let me know if anything happens.”

He’d taken another step when a chirp came from DeWalt’s workstation. “You aren’t going to believe this. You’re receiving another transmission.”

Eckhart doubled over and slouched toward his seat. “As long as it isn’t from Admiral Rear End.”

The others laughed, but this transmission wasn’t an anonymous communique. This one came from a nice-looking older woman with streaks of grey in her short hair. “Good morning, Captain. I’m Captain Alana Hennessey.”

Eckhart frowned at her. “I’m not a captain, ma’am. I’m just a man, and you can call me Eckhart. Everyone else does.”

She smiled at him. “Good to meet you, Eckhart. I’ve been ordered to take your vessel on board and conduct you to Earth in diplomatic state. If you’re ready, I’ll bring you in and you can—”

“Hold it right there, lady. You’ve been ordered…to take my vessel on board…”

“On board Colossus *Patriot*. We’re moving into position now, so if you just cut your engines—”

“No one is taking my vessel on board anything, lady,” Eckhart told her, “especially not on board a Regiment Colossus. Your Banshees just fired on us.”

She grimaced. “Rear Admiral Mitchell doesn’t belong to the Regiment anymore. He and his accomplices are waging a shadow war apart from the rest of us.”

“Shadow war?” Staton repeated.

“He and some of his fellow admirals took it upon themselves to defend Earth from the aliens by any means necessary. I’m afraid they’ve done some very objectionable things, but no one has been able to prove it before now. They aren’t operating under the Regiment’s mandate.”

Eckhart clenched his teeth. “It’s going to be nearly impossible to convince the aliens of that, ma’am.”

“I understand, but if we get you to Earth, you can explain it to the Intergalactic High Court. Isn’t that your mission?”

“Something like that, but I can’t allow your Colossus to take our ship on board. I’m sorry.”

She frowned. “Why not?”

“That’s my concern, ma’am. If you want to speed this up, you can escort us to Earth.”

“I can’t do that. If I don’t transport your vessel, I’ll have to stay here.”

“Fine,” Eckhart replied. “Just a word of warning, ma’am. If any alien vessels approach you trying to reach Earth, don’t stand against them.”

“I have to. It’s my duty to defend Earth.”

“You’ll only kill yourselves faster if you do. You can check the records for the Hydra sector if you don’t believe me. Trust me, ma’am, just let them through. Maybe then they’ll believe that you don’t pose a threat to them. That’s the only way you’re going to stop them from razing Earth.”

Her cheeks drained of all color, and Eckhart cut the line. He didn’t have time for this, and when he steered the *Marathon* past Atis Station and continued deeper into Regiment-controlled space, the *Patriot* didn’t accompany the *Marathon*.

What followed was one of the longest, most boring passages of Eckhart’s life. He would have slept through the whole thing and left all the minor course adjustments to his companions.

The Regiment had other ideas. Random Colossuses, stations, and too many officers to count kept bombarding him with messages, offers of transport, and even a few more offers of terms for the Regiment’s unconditional surrender.

He tried to delegate these to DeWalt and then, when DeWalt refused to even open them, to Clifton. None of the other men on board would touch the messages. They insisted on waking Eckhart up every time a transmission came through so he could repeat the same tired lines. He couldn’t keep track of which admirals were supposed to be official Regiment spokespeople and which belonged to this shadow company Captain Hennessy had mentioned. Eckhart had long since ceased to care.

At least now he knew this shadow company existed—unless

Captain Hennessy was lying and trying to pull a fast one on him. Several other captains and admirals tried to blame everything on Rear Admiral Enoch Mitchell, too. Eckhart's long dealings with the Regiment made him mistrust them all equally, which seemed to offend them beyond reason.

"Don't they even realize what the Regiment has been up to?" Short asked one evening when all six men sat around the galley eating and talking.

"Maybe not," DeWalt remarked. "If they're telling the truth, Mitchell and his people could have been doing all of this behind closed doors."

"Everyone knows," Staton countered. "Believe me. Everyone knows. If a major like me on an obscure station finds out about it, you can bet your boots everyone knows all the way up the chain of command, especially the admirals. They all know what their buddies are doing."

"He's right," Nuñez chimed in. "There were always admirals coming to observe us in the lab."

Eckhart turned to him. "What was it like? What were the experiments they did?"

Nuñez shrugged. "They injected us with a few things. Then, when our abilities started to develop, they tested us, and we practiced on shooting ranges and obstacle courses. You said your friend Akkek suffered the tortures of the damned in a Regiment lab, but it wasn't like that for us. We just kicked back and relaxed in between training sessions. It was comfortable—much more comfortable than anything I ever experienced on Earth."

"Did they tell you what they were training you for?" Clifton asked.

"Oh, sure. All the admirals who came to visit were always giving us lectures. They kept telling us how we couldn't let the aliens impoverish Earth by stopping the flow of goods and supplies."

"That's typical," Clifton growled. "It's all about the money."

"Not all. They made it pretty clear they were worried about the aliens rebelling and throwing the Regiment out. They were all adamant that we had to stop that from happening so the Regiment could keep control of the fringes. That was their whole mission."

"Did *all* the admirals say that?" Eckhart asked.

"They all said it," Nuñez replied. "They all repeated it like they didn't realize everyone else was saying it. Each one made out that

they were the first ones giving us this vital information."

Staton snorted. "Sounds like every pep talk I ever got in the Regiment."

A signal from the bridge cut him off. "That's for you, Eckhart," DeWalt informed him.

"I'm ignoring them from now on."

"You can't," Clifton told him. "If you don't answer, they might start to think you're turning hostile."

"Thanks a lot, man. We aren't friends anymore."

The others laughed, and Eckhart left the galley. He wasn't sure if he should start feeling guilty about enjoying the company of so many Earthlings. It seemed like betraying Alice and the rest of the *Marathon* crew, now that the only people on board were all Earthlings.

He headed for the bridge, trying to clear his head. Would the *Marathon* ever go back to the fringes after this? What if something happened and all six men got stranded on Earth forever?

What would Eckhart be on Earth? Would everyone look at him with the same disgust and loathing they used on aliens? Would all the people of Earth recognize that he was really an alien on the inside?

He was wearing a suit that made him look like an Earthling. That was all. He was an alien underneath…so why did he keep talking and laughing with these men like he was one of them?

He couldn't see himself as different from Clifton and DeWalt. They were aliens on the inside, just like himself. They looked like Earthlings on the outside, but they'd proved their worth too many times to fool him anymore.

He was starting to feel the same way about Staton, and he wasn't far away from seeing Short that way. Nuñez was another matter, but now that the asset had gotten around the other four, he was growing on Eckhart, too.

Eckhart started to understand what DeWalt had been saying all these weeks. These assets were just normal people. The Regiment had turned them into monsters, but underneath all those lasers, they were just guys.

Clifton had been in the Regiment. Dallas had been in the Regiment. They didn't talk about what they did while they were in it, but they might have taken part in some of the more despicable operations.

That didn't make them bad people, so maybe Nuñez wasn't so bad after all. He was doing the right thing now, wasn't he? Eckhart's plan didn't stand a chance without Nuñez.

He sat down and switched on the regulators. He found another transmission waiting for him from Captain Hennessy, and he opened it.

An explosion burst across the screen as soon as it switched on. The sparks and smoke cleared and she shoved her disheveled, soot-blackened face near the screen. "Call them off, Eckhart! You're the only one who can stop the slaughter!"

"Who is it?" Eckhart yelled back. "Who's attacking you?"

The image fizzed out for a second and she reappeared. "They're mowing down everything in their path! They aren't responding to our hails. We've transmitted requests for surrender. They won't communicate with us at all."

"Who?!" Eckhart bellowed and gave up on that. "Where are you? What system?"

She jerked away from the screen as another shower of sparks belched in her face. "We're in the Thurion system…but the alien horde is spilling over into the Thinides system, too. I've never seen a force this big…but the ships don't seem to be attacking. I don't understand it."

"Withdraw, Captain!" Eckhart roared. "Pull all your ships back! Get as far away from the aliens as you can, and order all your other ships to disperse. Get out of the aliens' path and scatter your fleet. Don't present any threat to them. Can you hear me?"

The connection jittered again, and then she vanished. Eckhart's hands trembled on the regulators. He scrambled to bring up scans of the Thurion system, and his blood ran cold when he saw the same invisible line chewing its way through the Regiment force.

It followed the same pattern as before. It started with the forwardmost Banshees, dismantled them with unseen hands, and left every ship adrift in pieces to become so much space trash.

Where was the *Patriot*? Eckhart searched the surviving Regiment vessels, but he couldn't identify any single ship from this distance.

The other men strolled in, and froze when they saw what Eckhart was looking at. "My God!" Clifton whispered.

"Is that...?" Short croaked.

"Yausqith," Eckhart replied.

He kept working over the scans in a desperate race to locate the

Patriot, but it was probably already too late. His hands shook, sending emergency alerts to every other ship he could contact. He ordered them to withdraw out of Yausqith's path and to put as much distance between themselves and every other Regiment asset as they could.

None of them moved. Did they receive his warning, or did they just ignore it because it didn't come from the chain of command?

At last, Yausqith reached the Stormbreaker line, leaving Banshees and Colossuses in fragments behind him. Eckhart's eyes hurt watching the destruction, but at that moment, a single Colossus broke through and hurtled away toward the rear.

The *Patriot* outpaced Yausqith in a dead race back toward Earth. The regulators buzzed again, and Captain Hennessy's dirty face reappeared. "They won't listen to me, Eckhart! I tried to tell them —"

"You did what you could. Now I need you to transmit the same message to the rest of the Regiment. Tell them they can't beat this alien."

Her jaw dropped. "*Alien*? It's only *one*?"

"I'm afraid so. Make sure the rest of the Regiment stays out of his way and tell them not to assemble any force against him. They'll only make him mad, and he'll take out his vengeance against Earth."

She wiped her wrist across her forehead. "Okay. I'll try…but they won't listen. Rear Admiral Mitchell is the one who communicates things like that up the chain of command to the General Staff. If he doesn't tell them, they'll never find out."

"What about Admiral Thiel?" Eckhart asked. "He listened."

"He's dead, isn't he? The General Staff will take his murder as evidence that the aliens will only betray their word."

"Regiment assets killed Admiral Thiel, not aliens."

"There's nothing I can do about that, Eckhart. I have to go. My ship is a mess."

She signed off, and Eckhart let out a shaky breath. "That's another Regiment force destroyed."

"You were right, Eckhart," Clifton remarked. "Getting the Intergalactic High Court to rule against the Regiment is the only way to stop them."

He, DeWalt, and Short left the bridge. Eckhart tried to ignore Nuñez watching him. Eckhart regretted that he hadn't gotten Nuñez

to confirm that he and his fellow assets were the ones who'd killed Admiral Thiel, but it was too late now. Captain Hennessy couldn't do anything about it anyway.

Nuñez broke in on his thoughts. "Thank you, Eckhart."

"What for—for dragging you back to Earth to stand trial for crimes against humanity? You don't want to thank me, pal. You're probably going to spend the rest of your life in prison when this is all over. Maybe you should have gone off with D'Alia and Fontana."

"I meant…thank you for giving me a chance to do the right thing. None of this would have happened if not for us."

Eckhart looked up. "You're welcome. Everyone deserves a chance to do the right thing."

Nuñez compressed his lips and then threw back his shoulders. "I want to go after them. I want to tackle D'Alia and Fontana. I want to neutralize them and bring them in to testify, too."

"Hold your horses, man. We need you to testify first. That's more important. If you try to tackle both of them, you might not come back at all. In fact, I'm sure you won't."

"Maybe not."

"You want to do the right thing? Give evidence before the High Court. Then we'll deal with the other two."

"You're a good man, Eckhart. You're the best leader the aliens could ask for."

"I doubt that," Eckhart muttered down at the regulators. "I didn't ask for this. I'd like to quit."

"But you don't quit. You're still here."

"Try not to remind me, okay? Oh, look. Here comes another goddamn transmission. What it is to be popular."

Nuñez snorted, but he didn't laugh. He never laughed. He always walked around with a cloud hanging over his head, but Eckhart guessed he was doing the same thing himself lately.

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13

Eckhart gazed at the high, jagged peaks of the Swiss Alps. City streets streamed with people—all Earthlings.

Their weird vehicles buzzed through the streets. Ships and personal transports floated from building to building. The whole place looked curiously…inhabited.

Why did he think it would be so different from the fringes? He didn't see anything that made this little planet so special. "Tell me again why I decided to do this."

"Because it's the right thing to do," Short replied.

"Because it's the only way to stop Yausqith," Clifton added.

"And the Regiment," Staton finished.

"And because you were curious about where all the Earthlings come from," DeWalt told him. "Tell me you don't at least want to see it. Tell me you aren't dying of curiosity to see the one planet in the galaxy without a single alien anywhere."

"You're right. I came this far. I'd better see it. Then I can go home."

Eckhart left the bridge, went to the cargo hold, and looked out at the streets full of people. They were all Earthlings. How strange this place looked. Was he really going out there?

The old hatred for Earthlings infected his thoughts. He'd spent so much time around aliens that he'd started to see Earthlings as his enemies, too. Spending the last several weeks with these five men hadn't changed that.

These creatures walking around looked so alien, so out of place. Where were all the real people?

DeWalt bumped into him on the way outside. He nodded to motion Eckhart forward. Short, Nuñez, and Clifton strode right out of the *Marathon* like this was no big deal. They didn't even notice how bizarre everyone looked.

The other five men surrounded Eckhart in a protective huddle. They kept looking around in mild interest, but he still sensed them shielding him like his personal bodyguards.

They crossed a huge square toward the giant building they said was the Intergalactic High Court building. It held pride of place

over a huge circular driveway. Pedestrians, ground vehicles, and transport hovercraft revolved around this circle in some unspoken coordinated dance.

His companions crossed the street and stopped at a round spot in the center. Grass, flowers, and a collection of statues rose behind the wrought-iron fence. The statues were all of Earthlings, too.

What a curious little world this was. Eckhart didn't understand it at all. All these people seemed to be celebrating the fact that they were all Earthlings. They seemed to want to elevate themselves and pretend there wasn't a horde of deadly aliens right on their doorstep.

DeWalt beamed at Eckhart. "Well? What do you think? Not too bad, huh?"

Short took a deep breath. "I never thought I'd make it back to Earth alive. It's good to be home."

"Let's get this High Court nonsense over with and get some food," Staton added. "I've been gone way too long."

Even Clifton was smiling, but Eckhart couldn't stop scowling at everything. What in the world was he doing here? Why did he even wonder if he could belong in a place like this?

DeWalt bumped his shoulder again, and the five of them started to walk around the statues. Eckhart couldn't figure out what the statues were supposed to be. They looked like Earthling females, but they were positioned in such unrealistic postures that they only looked hideous.

The group made it a quarter of the way around the circle. Eckhart passed the street on his left. He could look right in through vehicle windows at the Earthlings inside.

They didn't notice him. They didn't see anything unusual about him walking past them. None of them had any idea who he was.

He'd worried on his way to Earth if he would feel *too* at home here. He'd kept experiencing pangs of misgiving that he'd like it too much and decide to stay. Now that he was here, he only felt more alien than ever. A great pressure blocked him from moving forward. It seemed to lean against his chest. It was trying to push him backward, back toward the *Marathon*. It wanted him to get on board, fly away, and go back to the fringes where he could start breathing freely again.

He couldn't back out on his mission now, though. He'd made a commitment to these men, to the fringes, and to himself to finish

this once and for all. He'd lost Alice to accomplish this, and he couldn't let that sacrifice go for nothing.

Clifton and DeWalt sped up now that the High Court building was right in front of them. It looked even taller and more impressive here. It actually looked like it might be powerful enough to stop the Regiment, if Eckhart could only make it listen.

Clifton glanced behind him to make sure none of the vehicles were about to cut them off. DeWalt approached what looked like a crossing. A few colored lights flashed to signal pedestrians to cross or not to cross when vehicles were nearby.

Eckhart stopped with his comrades. Short twisted his fingers together and looked over his shoulder before squinting up at the building. He wasn't smiling anymore. No one was.

DeWalt pushed the button to change the signal. Eckhart peered past the statues toward the *Marathon*, parked in a public lot across the square. Dozens of other ships surrounded it. It didn't look like anything special here. No one knew it brought the alien leader to Earth.

A chirp sounded to indicate they could cross the street. Clifton and DeWalt started forward, and Eckhart waited for the crowd to start moving, when a vicious laser smashed into the sidewalk right in front of DeWalt.

The pavement cracked, and screaming people surged back against Eckhart. They bounced off him, running for cover.

Eckhart froze, staring up at one of the assets hovering over the High Court building. Whoever it was pounded the street right on top of the five friends.

Nuñez launched off the ground streaking for the asset. "No, Nuñez!" Eckhart bellowed. "Nuñez—*no*!"

Nuñez paid no attention. He rocketed into the air and collided with the asset in a blaze of glory. They hurtled over the High Court roof, and the blazing light from their combined coronas soared higher, getting smaller.

At the same instant, the second asset dropped from on high, cutting up the street as he went. He veered around the circle, destroying vehicles and buildings, and blasted three statues to smithereens.

The asset came whistling around the other side, carving the pavement in deep furrows. The lasers crawled closer to where Eckhart stood.

He bolted away with Clifton, DeWalt, and Staton right with him. Eckhart realized a moment too late that Short wasn't with them.

The young man remained rooted to the spot, gaping up at the asset in slack-jawed shock. Eckhart charged back to Short's side, grabbed him, and pulled him into a run. "Move it! Get back to the *Marathon*! Run!"

Short stumbled into their midst. The other three surrounded Short, and Eckhart tried to find his way back to the *Marathon*, but the asset had other plans.

The asset veered in front of them, pounding the sidewalk with lasers. So many people stampeded for cover that they all ended up fighting each other to get away. Everyone ran in another direction and blocked each other from escaping.

Eckhart tried to plow his way through them, but the asset came rocketing back just as fast. Screaming, falling bodies jumbled into a confused mass, preventing Eckhart from going anywhere.

The asset wheeled to his right, and Eckhart looked straight up at the guy. The black outline inside the halo had short-buzzed hair. It was Fontana.

Fontana hung in space right in front of Eckhart. Eckhart's scalp prickled, and he realized Fontana was about to fire on him a fraction of a second before it happened.

Eckhart grabbed Clifton and DeWalt. "Get down!"

He flattened them an instant before Fontana fired. The lasers zinged over Eckhart's head and smashed into the iron fence. They burned through the metal and decimated the statues.

Fontana's assault leveled everyone around the friends. People who didn't take cover in time hit the pavement, and Eckhart yanked his friends to their feet. They took off running, stepping on bodies, vaulting broken pavement, and reached the street on the other side.

Fontana swiveled in front of them to stop them from reaching the *Marathon*. He spouted lasers at them, and Eckhart shoved his friends into another run. They dodged vehicles only for Fontana to detonate them right on top of them.

Eckhart dove into an alley between two brick structures. He dragged his four friends behind the walls and huddled for cover.

Fontana swooped back and forth beyond the mouth of the alley. He stationed himself between the five fugitives and the *Marathon*. Eckhart couldn't reach the ship with Fontana in the way. Even if he could, Fontana would only start shooting at the *Marathon* next.

“Eckhart, I never…want to see…you again,” Short wheezed. His lower lip started to tremble. “Seriously…just…leave me alone from now on…okay?”

Eckhart gripped his shoulder. “I’m sorry, son, but it’s too late now. He’ll kill you whether you’re with me or not.”

Eckhart couldn’t look at the kid hovering on the brink of hysteria. He didn’t want to think he might be responsible for getting Short killed. That would be too much right now.

Eckhart glanced outside again. “We need to distract him so we can get to the ship.”

“What about…?” DeWalt began.

A high-pitched shriek of some falling projectile cut him off, and at that moment, the same starburst of blinding light rocketed across the square. It leveled the last remaining statue and smashed into Fontana with a deafening boom.

The momentum carried all three assets the rest of the way across the square. They slammed into a large ship parked near the *Marathon*, and in a split second, their combined halo zoomed back the other way.

“Go!” Eckhart hauled Short and DeWalt into the open. “To the ship!”

He bent his head and ran for all he was worth. That terrible whistling howl of the assets rocketing around the circle drove his nerves to the breaking point.

He pounded up the hatch and pushed Clifton, Staton, DeWalt, and Short into the cargo hold. Eckhart looked back in time to see the supernova of all three assets collide with the High Court building.

The building imploded in a massive cloud of dust and flying stone. “Holy crap!” Short croaked.

“Go!” Eckhart wheeled away and slammed the release to shut the hatch. “Strap in! Hurry!”

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14

Eckhart slammed the regulators forward, and the *Marathon* sprinted through Earth's atmosphere. He checked the tactical grid for any sign of the three assets, but he didn't see anything.

Staton sprang to the navigation station where Alice used to sit. "You're being hailed by about fifty Regiment ships. They're coming in from all over to fight the assets."

"That's rich," DeWalt replied from Rixby's old workstation. "They're the ones who are supposed to be controlling these guys."

"Half the Regiment force is demanding your immediate surrender," Staton went on. "The other half are requesting assistance after Fontana attacked them."

"Just find them!" Eckhart ordered. "We can't do shit if we don't know where they are."

"Here they come!" DeWalt cried. "They're coming from—"

Another shriek vibrated the hull, and then the assets slammed the *Marathon* sideways as the three men streaked past.

"They're heading back toward Earth—" Staton began. "No, scratch that. They're veering off."

Eckhart could see perfectly well what the assets were doing. They jerked back and forth, changing course every second. The three men wrestled and struggled and fought inside their combined halo.

"It's a miracle Nuñez has been holding his own this long," Clifton remarked from behind Eckhart's chair.

"He won't be able to hold out forever. Hold on!"

The three assets rocketed around the sun, and came winging back on another collision course for Earth. Their corona wobbled, but Nuñez couldn't stop the other two.

Eckhart reacted on instinct and ripped the *Marathon* into their path. He braced his body back in his chair, and the assets smashed into the Celdian shields with unspeakable force.

The ship staggered, but that blow was enough to stop the assets from reaching Earth. They pulled back, sprang forward to make another attempt, and Eckhart opened fire.

He pounded them with Datrium even though he knew it

wouldn't do any good. He couldn't make a dent in one of these guys, let alone three of them.

His shots hit their halo and enveloped it for a second. The next instant, an unholy spray of lasers erupted from the rim and drove all that Datrium back against the ship.

"Hang on!" Eckhart roared over the noise.

"They're draining our Celdian fast!" Staton called back. "We're down to 30% and falling fast. We can't stand this much longer!"

"Forty Regiment vessels on approach!" DeWalt reported. "They're ordering you to stand down, the fools!"

Eckhart didn't answer. He gritted his teeth and strained his arms to the breaking point. He smashed down the regulators to hold the ship in position. He fired all his plasma at the assets, but nothing broke the continuous fountain of lasers pounding the shields.

He squinted down at the floor so the epic blaze of light coming from the halo didn't break his concentration. He had to hold out for…*some*thing. He was the only thing standing between the assets and Earth.

"Celdian at 15%!" Staton called. "We're reaching the ionosphere! If they drive us any lower, gravity will take us down."

Eckhart didn't answer. The assets skated sideways and tried to dodge around him to get into the atmosphere. He almost lacked the arm strength to move the helm enough to stay in their path.

The laser bombardment reached a brutal pitch. "Celdian at 9%!" Staton warned. "They'll hit the hull any second now!"

Eckhart shut his eyes the rest of the way. He couldn't do any more, but at that moment, a crash startled him into opening them again.

A Regiment Colossus plunged between the assets and the *Marathon*. It flew straight into the lasers' path, and every one of the assets' weapons struck the Colossus full force.

The blow hurled the *Patriot* against the *Marathon*'s flank and the *Marathon* wheeled out of the way. The *Patriot* pivoted and unloaded on the assets as another ten ships attacked from all sides.

They surrounded the assets, with the *Marathon* outside their protective ring. The assets unleashed all their lasers on their former comrades, and the tactical grid read more Regiment Banshees on their way.

All three assets still struggled and wrestled inside the corona. Eckhart could even distinguish one man from the other now.

“Find a way to disrupt that field!” he told DeWalt. “We have to get Nuñez out of there.”

“How?” DeWalt asked. “The field is impenetrable.”

“There has to be some vulnerability.”

“There is,” Clifton interjected. “You have the plant and the Thalzu skin from Vaebbe.”

Eckhart whipped around to stare at him and then sprang out of his chair. “Clifton, you’re a genius! Staton, take over! Fly the ship.”

“Hey!” Staton yelled, but Eckhart was already lunging off the bridge.

“Where is it?” he called over his shoulder to Clifton on their way downstairs. “Where did they put the Thalzu skin?”

“It’s in the Crick centrifuge. Dallas said it was the only place big enough to hold it and keep it out of everyone’s way.”

Eckhart raced for the infirmary. He kicked himself for not talking to Dallas about the skin before now. He’d just have to take precautions.

He grabbed a spare pair of Kesmite gloves, a scalpel, and the glass case holding the last remaining plants the crew had collected on Vaebbe. There were still plenty in the case—at least Eckhart hoped it would be enough to defeat these assets. He no longer cared if he spared any of those men. He had to stop them from attacking Earth.

Clifton tailed him downstairs. “What are you going to do?”

“Help me, Clifton,” Eckhart panted. “I need you to get one of the pounders out of the weapons locker and completely unload it…and make it a big one.”

Clifton vanished, and Eckhart set the glass case on the floor next to the Crick centrifuge. This was by far the stupidest and least strategic plan of his whole checkered career.

He looked into the centrifuge. An enormous blob of some leathery substance took up all the space in there. Some sticky blue-black goo dripped into the centrifuge from the Thalzu skin.

He had no idea what he would do or what he *should* do, but if just a little of the plant material had been enough to kill the Thalzu, this had to work. He was all out of options if it didn’t.

He pulled on the gloves, extended his arms into the centrifuge, and carved off a section of the skin. He didn’t have a clue how to do this. He was making shit up as he went.

If Odais was right, and Alice had killed the Thalzu just by taking

some of this plant into its mouth, then just putting the plant in contact with the skin would cause the cellular disruption Eckhart wanted. He could only hope.

He sawed off a big, juicy piece of the skin with plenty of goo dripping from it. It slithered and slipped against his gloves. He dropped the skin into the glass container and used the skin to pick up a piece of the plant.

Clifton came hurrying back, carrying the biggest pounder from the locker. The weapon was way too big for Eckhart to use, but that didn't matter. "Lay it on the floor right here."

Eckhart dropped one of the biggest pounder charges down the tube and then stuffed the plant-and-skin package down after it. He stretched his arm up to the shoulder, cramming it as far and as tight as he could against the charge.

Eckhart pulled one of the atmospheric pressure suits out of the locker and started climbing into it. "This is insane," Clifton murmured. "You know that, don't you?"

"You guys really need to stop telling me that. I already know."

Clifton tried to smile, but failed. Eckhart handed him the safety tether. "Strap me in."

Clifton clipped the tether to the hold wall. His face twisted when he came back to watch Eckhart zip himself into the suit.

"Get back upstairs!" Eckhart yelled through the helmet. "Tell Staton to activate the life support pressure envelope across the hull!"

Clifton retreated, and Eckhart lost sight of him. He couldn't think about these people anymore. He could only think of one thing: Earth.

He really must be an Earthling after all if he was going to these lengths to save this pathetic little planet. Why did he care so much?

The envelope switched on, and the pressurized air inside his suit woofed outward. It puffed up his suit, and he started to float off the floor. He picked up the pounder, and the tether started to extend.

"Can you hear me, Eckhart?" Staton asked inside his helmet. "Let me know the communications system is working."

"I can hear you. Try to get as close to the assets as you can."

"It's gonna be tough. The Regiment is in the way."

"Open the hatch."

Eckhart tilted toward the hatch as it opened. The *Marathon* fired its engines, and he drifted outside.

He saw right away what Staton meant. Regiment vessels surrounded the assets. They all unloaded on the assets' halo, trying to destroy the men inside. The assets returned fire with devastating lasers that cut the Regiment ships to pieces.

"Get closer!" Eckhart ordered. "Find me an opening."

"If we get too close, one of the lasers could hit your suit," DeWalt argued.

Eckhart rotated the pounder into position. It weighed nothing out here, and he could handle it easily. He just had to make sure not to lose his grip on it.

The *Marathon* eased closer to the battle. Every burst of the engines jerked Eckhart against his tether. He had to constantly adjust his position and his aim.

The assets hovered at the center of the Regiment assault. Colossus hulls blocked Eckhart from seeing the men inside. He raised his weapon and aimed at the back of what he thought was the *Patriot*.

At that moment, one of the assets' lasers hit another ship's starboard engine. The explosion knocked the ship out of line and left a gap between it and the *Patriot*.

"Now, Martin!" Eckhart roared.

Staton punched the throttle so hard Eckhart got thrown back against his tether. His body tumbled backward until he was facing away from the battle.

The *Marathon* sprinted into the stricken ship's place, and lasers smashed into the *Marathon*'s hull. It didn't have any Celdian left and the lasers sliced straight into the bridge section.

Eckhart clung onto his pounder with one hand while he scrambled to turn himself in the right direction. He pulled on the tether and overcorrected. He spun the other way until he finally floated to a stop facing the assets.

He raised his pounder. None of the assets even noticed him. They were too busy fighting each other.

He leveled his weapon at them and fired. The charge blasted out of the tube, carrying the skin and plant package with it. It punched through the assets' corona, and a blinding explosion smacked Eckhart backward with unspeakable force.

He lost his hold on his weapon and slammed hard at the limit of his tether. The whiplash jerked him the other way, and then he was spinning through space with no way to stop himself. Had the tether

broken?

He floundered to grab it. The clip still attached the line to his suit, and his suit was still intact, but he couldn't tell for one panicked moment if the tether still connected him to the ship.

He rotated in a complete circle and faced the open hatch. The *Marathon* hung before him, shining like some kind of Heaven welcoming him home. Clifton stood inside, hauling in the tether hand over hand.

Eckhart's stomach hurt from all the adrenaline coursing through him. He was alive. He was going back home to the *Marathon*. He didn't care about anything else.

He collapsed on the floor at Clifton's feet and the hatch slammed shut behind him. Eckhart struggled to breathe, and his hands were shaking.

Clifton attacked his suit and ripped the zipper down. He dragged Eckhart's helmet off. "Are you okay? Are you hurt? Is anything broken?"

"I'm…okay. What happened? Where are the assets?"

"I don't know. Get out of this suit and we'll go find out."

Eckhart let Clifton help him peel the suit off. He'd sat down on the floor to kick the boots off when the hatch clanged open again.

A great whoosh of fresh air rushed in from outside. Clifton and Eckhart both turned around to see the same destroyed square standing before them. Sirens went off in the distance, and bodies strewed the pavement.

Clifton helped Eckhart to his feet. They started toward the hatch when Staton, DeWalt, and Short came running downstairs.

The five men tiptoed outside. "What happened?" Eckhart asked. "What happened to the assets?"

"We aren't sure," Staton replied. "You hit them and they exploded. We don't know what happened to them after that."

"The blast threw the Regiment ships out of the way, too," DeWalt added. "A bunch of them got damaged, but they're out of danger now. The assets are gone."

"Gone?" Eckhart repeated. "They aren't gone. They're…"

He stepped off the ramp onto the sidewalk and looked up at the sky almost as though he knew what was about to happen. He searched for the assets' bright halo, but he spotted something small and black plummeting out of the atmosphere instead.

It dropped at terminal velocity and crashed into a vehicle parked

in the middle of the street. The projectile smashed in the vehicle's roof, and all the windows exploded before Eckhart realized the falling object was actually two men locked together in an unbreakable embrace.

The explosion startled a bunch of nearby onlookers into ducking for cover. A second later, dead silence fell over the square except for more broken glass crumbling from the vehicle's shattered window frames.

Eckhart and his friends tiptoed closer, and Eckhart stared at Fontana prying himself out of Nuñez's arms. Nuñez lay unconscious in the massive dent the two men had driven into the vehicle's metal roof.

Fontana pushed himself up, stared down at Nuñez's impassive face, and then looked around.

Eckhart approached the vehicle. "You okay, man?"

Fontana studied Eckhart and then his friends before sweeping the ruined square. "I…uh." He looked down at Nuñez, trying to figure something out. "He…I can't fly anymore. He did something to me."

Eckhart extended his hand to Fontana. "Come on down. We can talk about you giving testimony to the High Court now."

Fontana didn't hear him. He bent over Nuñez and yelled in his friend's face. "Tony! Tony, wake up! Tony!"

He started shaking Nuñez by the shoulders, but Nuñez didn't wake up. "It sure would be nice to have a Yakit with us right about now," DeWalt remarked.

Eckhart climbed up on the vehicle's broken window and knelt down next to Nuñez. He was really starting to wish Bing was here when someone bellowed right in his ear.

"Get your hands in the air! Don't move!" A bunch of armed men pointed their weapons in his face. "Get your hands above your head! You're under arrest!"

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15

Eckhart buried his face in his hands and groaned. “I already told you who I am. What more do you want me to say?”

An Earthling officer waved some kind of electronic device at Eckhart. “We’ve done DNA scans on you, fingerprint tracing, retinal scans, and mitochondrial DNA matching sequences. You don’t turn up in any of our databases, not even the ones for every Earthling born at fringe stations and outposts all the way to the rim of known space. You don’t exist. You’re a ghost.”

Eckhart heaved an almighty sigh. He’d been at this for hours trying to explain what he was doing on Earth, how he knew how to neutralize the assets, and every other detail of his mission and recent past.

Now this idiot was questioning Eckhart on his distant past and his origins, but no matter what Eckhart said, the guy didn’t believe him. None of these Earthlings wanted to accept that another Earthling could be born on a fringe planet without the Regiment finding out about it.

The officer leaned back in his chair and tossed the device on the table between himself and Eckhart. “All right. Let’s go over it again.”

“Do we have to?” Eckhart moaned.

“What planet were you born on?”

“Parilia. I told you.”

“I’ve never heard of it.”

Eckhart snorted. “Have you ever been off of Earth?”

The officer ignored the question. “And you say you never knew your parents?”

“Nope. I never laid eyes on them.”

“How do you know?” the officer asked. “How do you know they didn’t die when you were young?”

“Is that relevant? If I don’t remember them, what difference does it make when they died? None of this is relevant to what happened at the Intergalactic High Court building.”

“Humor me.” The guy picked up his device and consulted it like he really didn’t know already what was on it. “It’s interesting,

because the Regiment database doesn't even list a planet by that name in the sector you mentioned."

"That's because the Regiment doesn't have a presence on Parilia. There are planets in the galaxy that the Regiment doesn't control, you know."

The guy shrugged. "Maybe, but if you're right, that makes your history an even bigger mystery, doesn't it? If the Regiment doesn't have a presence there and it's so far out on the fringes that we've never even heard of it, how did you get there? What were your parents doing that far out that they'd actually give birth to a child out there, let alone abandon you on a planet crawling with aliens?"

Eckhart stared at the man. The officer stared back at him, waiting for him to answer.

"Well?" the guy asked. "How do you explain this?"

"I don't," Eckhart replied. "I don't think about it. I have much more pressing matters to deal with. Trust me."

"So you never once considered how strange it is that you were born on such a planet?"

"I might have wondered about it once or twice, but not much. That didn't seem all that relevant to the project of staying alive… kind of like it isn't relevant to what happened at the High Court building."

"Oh, but you see, it is relevant. See, here's a man who's obviously an Earthling. Your DNA clearly indicates that you are one."

"I know I am. I've been telling you for four hours that I'm an Earthling."

"You're an Earthing with no identity."

"I have an identity." Eckhart burst out laughing. "I know who I am. A lot of people know who I am. The mystery is why *you* don't know who I am."

"That's exactly why you're here, pal. We can't believe a word you say until we know who you are. Your story is the biggest load of crap I've ever heard in my career, which means you're our biggest suspect for the crimes committed outside the High Court building."

Eckhart couldn't stop laughing. This whole thing was turning into a farce. How could he be the biggest warlord on the fringes and these Earthlings not even know who he was? He couldn't even walk into a bar on the fringes without every man and his dog knowing

his name.

He'd taken over Aistenz Trotaer's empire. He had sparked a galactic rebellion that attracted millions of fighters from every species. Eckhart had become practically a dignitary, accepting offers of surrender from the Regiment itself, and he was still totally unknown to his own people.

These weren't his people. These Earthlings were something truly alien. They were beyond backward.

All these centuries, the people of Earth had sent out the Regiment to grind the fringes under its heel. They did all that on the pretext that Earth was somehow more enlightened and advanced and superior to the lawless alien fringes.

Maybe that was why Eckhart had been so curious to see Earth for himself. He wanted to see what the hell was so special about this place and its people.

Now Eckhart saw firsthand that the whole mythology was reversed. The people of Earth were nothing special. They were degenerate and primitive—much more so than the fringe aliens.

He wanted nothing more to do with these people. Eckhart had done what he had to do to stop the Regiment's assets. Now he could leave…as soon as he got out of this shithole and stopped answering these moronic questions.

"Tell me again why you came to Earth in the first place," the officer prompted.

Eckhart took another deep, steadying breath. "I came to stop the aliens from destroying the Regiment."

"You said earlier that you started the rebellion."

"I did."

"Then you're responsible for the aliens slaughtering hundreds of thousands of Earthlings while the Regiment was trying to evacuate them."

"I'm not responsible for that. The aliens who carried out those attacks weren't under my control."

"You just said you started the rebellion. The aliens wouldn't have gone out of control if you didn't instigate them to do it."

"The Regiment was planning to wipe out the whole fringe population. I had no choice but to start the rebellion to stop them."

"We have nothing but your word that the Regiment developed these doomsday weapons to wipe out the fringe population. There's no proof."

Eckhart sighed again. “I already told you a dozen times. I came to Earth to bring the proof. I brought people who could testify about what the Regiment was doing.”

“You’re talking about Nuñez, but he’s in intensive care in the hospital. He might not live.”

Eckhart looked down at the tabletop. “I’m sorry to hear that. He’s a good man.”

“You said he wiped out whole populations after he escaped Regiment control.”

“He was trying to do the right thing by coming back with me. He was trying to do the right thing when he attacked his own comrades. He was trying to stop them from destroying the square.”

The officer leaned back in his chair. “I don’t believe you. This is all part of your ridiculous story. You’re trying to make yourself out to be some kind of superhero who—”

The door opened and another man entered. He wore some kind of uniform, but it wasn’t a Regiment uniform. Eckhart didn’t recognize it.

The second guy waved another electronic device at Eckhart. “We’re done here, Mr. Eckhart.”

The first officer spun around. “What—no! We’re only getting started.”

“We’ve confirmed his story. We’ve questioned his crewmen, and we’ve received reports from all over the Regiment.” The guy approached the table and stuck out his hand. “I’m Sergeant Sean Banks. I’m the section chief for Interpol in this part of Europe. If you come with me, I have some people who want to see you.”

Eckhart shook the guy’s hand in a daze. “As long as they aren’t going to question me anymore.”

“No one’s going to question you anymore. We’ve confirmed your story. Come with me.”

Eckhart followed him out of the room. The first officer glared at him, and then vanished as Eckhart stumbled down the hall. He pulled his head together. They believed him. Was it over, then?

“You’ve been up to some big things lately,” Banks remarked. “It doesn’t seem possible that one man could do all that.”

“I wasn’t up to anything big,” Eckhart replied. “I was just dealing with each emergency in front of me at the time.”

“The Regiment wants to give you a Medal of Honor for what you did last night. The Regiment General Staff is extremely grateful for

you defeating those…those *things*."

Eckhart exploded in laughter. "The Regiment isn't pinning any medal on me, pal. No way."

"You saved millions of lives. You saved all of Earth."

"Just give me back my ship and let me go home. That's all the thanks I ask."

"We can't let you go just yet. I'm sorry, but we still have a situation to deal with."

"Yeah, I know. D'Alia is still out there, but I can find him much better from out there than I can here."

"Maybe this will be a start to show you that we're sincere about working with you from now on." Banks waved toward an open door.

Eckhart inched closer. He didn't want to find out what was inside that room, but he charged forward when he saw Short, Clifton, and DeWalt inside.

They surrounded him, all talking at once. "No one would tell us where you were!" Short exclaimed.

"Are you okay?" DeWalt asked. "They said they were interrogating you."

"How's Nuñez?" Clifton asked. "No one will tell us anything."

"They weren't interrogating me with anything but a million questions. Are *you* okay? They said you confirmed my story."

"It wasn't hard," Clifton replied. "We just told the truth."

"I called my father," DeWalt added. "He admitted dosing my drink with something from the Trinity Code group. He didn't know what it would do."

"I told the authorities all about the *Marathon* rescuing me from Dhairi and working with Rixby to find a way to defeat the assets," Short chimed in. "I don't know how much they believed, though."

"Where's Staton?" Eckhart asked. "Did they take him back to the Regiment?"

"Martin Staton is in protective custody," Banks replied from the doorway. "He's still on the Regiment roster, so we had to find a way to stop them from taking him away from us until we got his testimony. Don't worry. He's completely safe."

"What about Fontana?" Eckhart asked. "The Regiment will be much more concerned about shutting him up than Staton."

"Fontana's also in protective custody, but both he and Staton have already told us enough that we know you've been telling the

truth."

"So what are you going to do?" Clifton asked. "How do we bring a case before the High Court without two of our witnesses?"

"Interpol has already lodged the first filings with the High Court. The High Court will review the testimony from all six of you, as well as testimony from other Regiment officers…"

"What Regiment officers?" Eckhart interrupted. "What Regiment officers would testify against the Regiment? They're all either involved in the Regiment's crimes, or they're too afraid to stick their necks out."

Banks checked his device. "A certain Captain Alana Hennessy of the Colossus *Patriot* has forwarded her duty reports to me…and Admirals Stockdale, Joiner, and Christensen are all prepared to testify that it was the Regiment's own experimental assets that attacked your diplomatic team at Inoash. A few others have had the courage to come forward, too."

"What do you need us for, then?" Short asked. "Why are we still here?"

"Interpol is prepared to offer the three of you protective custody, too. We understand if you don't feel safe walking freely before the Regiment gets called to account for its crimes, especially its crimes against you. We understand this is a sensitive case, and the Regiment has already gone to exceptional lengths to stop the people of Earth from finding out what they were up to."

DeWalt, Clifton, and Short all stiffened and flanked Eckhart. "What about Eckhart?" DeWalt asked. "Why aren't you offering him protective custody?"

Banks only smiled. "Unfortunately, we have a much more serious situation when it comes to Eckhart."

"What do you mean?" Eckhart asked. "You said that before. What's so serious?"

Banks motioned behind him. "If you come with me, I'll show you. When you see what I have to show you, I think you'll all agree that Mr. Eckhart can't stay on Earth."

Eckhart frowned, and Short murmured the words they were all thinking. "I don't like this. I don't like this at all."

Banks was already walking away down the hall. Eckhart didn't like this, either. He didn't want to find out what Banks meant, but insatiable curiosity left him no choice. If something was going on to stop him from finally bringing this disaster to a close, he had to

know about it.

The four men followed Banks to the farthest end of the corridor. He entered a control room packed with equipment. A bunch of technicians worked on long-range scanners sweeping the space around Earth, farther afield in the solar system, and even farther into Regiment-controlled space.

Banks pointed to one of the many screens. “Look.”

Eckhart and his friends gathered around, and Eckhart’s stomach turned. That invisible wave of destruction crawled its way through space. It was still a long way from Earth, but it wormed closer by the second.

“The Regiment received your message about not standing up to that thing,” Banks told him, “but I don’t think the alien got the memo.”

No Regiment ships stood in Yausqith’s path. The Regiment had evacuated every station within the alien’s range. The display clearly showed the locations of Regiment stations and colonies, with no life signs still in residence.

Yausqith no longer specifically targeted the Regiment, its stations, or really anything in particular. He’d expanded to an absolutely galactic size, and he mowed down everything—alien populations, planets, freight ships—*everything*.

He crumbled planets. He snuffed out stars and swallowed nebulas. He left a trail of carnage and devastation stretching for thousands of parsecs. No matter what he did and where he went, he always headed in one direction.

He was heading straight for Earth.

“Shit!” DeWalt whispered.

“We need you to stop it,” Banks murmured. “We don’t dare to deploy the Regiment against it. We don’t have anything that can stop it. Do you?”

Eckhart tried to look away from the screen, but a magnetic force locked his eyes in place. He couldn’t stop watching. Was he responsible for this? Had he done this by starting the rebellion in the first place?

Rixby had set this thing loose on the galaxy to stop the assets. She’d done that because of Eckhart. She’d done it to free him from the Regiment.

It all came back to him. Eckhart had done this. He’d started this, and now he had to finish it. The question was how.

Nothing could defeat Yausqith. He was a force of nature. Eckhart didn't know anyone on the fringes who even knew what Yausqith was…except one person.

"Eckhart?" Short asked. "Can you stop it?"

Eckhart straightened up, but he still had to work hard to stop looking at the screen. He turned to his friends, but he hardly saw them anymore. "You boys stay here. I'll handle this."

"Forget it!" Clifton countered. "We're going with you."

"No. You've done enough. You stay here. You'll be safe here."

"We don't want to be safe, Eckhart," DeWalt countered. "If you're going out there, we're coming with you."

Eckhart couldn't argue anymore. Time was running out. "Where's the *Marathon*?" he asked Banks.

"It's in the Zurich police impound yard."

"Is it damaged in any way?"

"It was fine when we landed on the square," DeWalt pointed out.

"It's in exactly the same condition it was in when you were arrested," Banks replied. "I'll take you there."

Eckhart shook himself awake and turned to Short. "Jacob…"

"I'm staying. Don't worry."

Eckhart laughed with Short and squeezed the young man's shoulder. "Thank you, Jacob. I owe you big time."

"You don't owe me anything, Eckhart. I just wish I could do more for you. If you see Dallas again, tell him…"

Eckhart nodded. "I'll tell him. See you later."

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16

Eckhart, Clifton, and DeWalt strode across the impound lot toward the *Marathon*… or where Sergeant Banks had told them the *Marathon* was. Eckhart couldn't see a thing in the dark and the pissing rain, but he wasn't really looking either way.

He kept seeing Yausqith. Yausqith had gotten so much bigger than Eckhart remembered the alien being in the Hydra sector. Maybe Yausqith gained strength and size from all the ships, people, and planets he destroyed. How should Eckhart know what Yausqith did or how he worked?

Eckhart's mind flicked back to Rixby, but she wasn't here. She was light years away on the *Atera*, but she must realize what Yausqith was doing. Everyone on the fringes must know by now.

Did they blame Eckhart, too? Did the fringe aliens lay all these deaths at Eckhart's door? He wouldn't blame them.

How could he ever go back out there after this disaster? This rebellion had turned into something so much worse than he'd ever dared to imagine. He never would have started the rebellion if he knew how it would go.

Clifton bumped his arm. "This way."

Eckhart followed them, and they found the ship. It looked lifeless and decrepit in the rain, but it was all Eckhart had left.

He went up to the bridge and powered up. The regulators showed him Yausqith's advance—and then he spotted D'Alia.

The last remaining asset had left Earth on an intercept course for Yausqith. Did D'Alia really think he could stop Yausqith by himself?

Eckhart scrambled over the regulators to get the ship off the ground. DeWalt went to Rixby's old station, and Clifton to navigation. Eckhart launched and put on speed to catch up with D'Alia, but he was still too far behind. D'Alia had too long a head start.

Eckhart pushed the throttle farther forward. He kept accelerating until the *Marathon* couldn't fly any faster, but it still wasn't enough to match D'Alia's unstoppable advance. He would meet Yausqith any second now.

D'Alia plunged into the invisible field sweeping toward him. He

showed up in the tactical grid as a spherical ball of light. Eckhart couldn't see the man inside from this distance.

Eckhart fought down the urge to call out to D'Alia. He couldn't let D'Alia destroy himself like this. Not even knowing that Banks and the High Court were handling things back on Earth without D'Alia's testimony eased Eckhart's anxiety to save his life.

D'Alia couldn't hear that voice in Eckhart's head. D'Alia couldn't know that Eckhart wanted to save him. D'Alia thought Eckhart was his enemy.

D'Alia increased his speed and raced straight into Yausqith's clutches. The breaking wave swallowed his halo, and Eckhart lost sight of the asset for a minute.

His heart sank—but Yausqith wasn't advancing anymore.

The wave hovered in the middle of a lonely solar system far out in Regiment-controlled space. It shimmered for a second. Its outer edges swirled in to surround something, and then a blinding flash erupted in the center.

Sparks and bursts rippled outward from that nexus. Light showered down the wave's outer arms. They swooped inward to wrap around the asset, but neither of them could move. Yausqith couldn't leave the system as long as D'Alia stood in his path.

Eckhart's heart leapt into his throat, and he pushed the throttle forward. The engines howled. Banks had resupplied the *Marathon* with Datrium and Celdian—not that any of that would help the ship against Yausqith. Eckhart would have to come up with some other plan to defeat this alien.

He was still many parsecs away when D'Alia tore out of Yausqith's grip, veered backward, and started bombarding the mysterious alien force with lasers. The dark wave enveloped every shot. They didn't damage Yausqith, but he still couldn't get past D'Alia.

The outer arms of Yausqith's wave slithered closer and lashed around to whip D'Alia, but his lasers deflected them, too. They were evenly matched, and neither could overcome the other.

Eckhart's heart stood still watching these two forces locked in battle. Could D'Alia win against this alien? Eckhart didn't want to believe that. He didn't want to trust it.

Eckhart hurtled through the last solar system. He was almost there when D'Alia pulled all the lasers in his halo into one devastating beam. He sliced into Yausqith, but the shot went

straight through the wave without even touching it. The wave blurred for a second and became less distinct.

The next second, the two arms undulated through the air and closed with impossible speed. They slapped D'Alia's halo and imploded it for a split second.

D'Alia lurched under the blow, and his lasers stuttered out for an instant. He recovered a second later and opened fire as never before, but the message couldn't be clearer. Yausqith could hit him and damage him.

Eckhart gunned the *Marathon* into the battle and came up behind D'Alia. He opened fire with all his guns blazing. He pounded Yausqith with Datrium, but the thing just swallowed the *Marathon*'s shots. Did all that energy make Yausqith stronger, too?

D'Alia fired his lasers into the same spot as Eckhart's plasma shots, but not even shooting together made any difference.

The wave's arms lashed back to their original position and then whipcracked inward one more time. They swept across the vacuum of space, and as they converged on the *Marathon*, those arms separated into dozens of arms, all slithering and hissing through the stars.

They smashed down on the *Marathon* and on D'Alia, and his halo blinked out for longer this time. He went dark, and the concussion sent the *Marathon* reeling miles backward.

Eckhart gripped the regulators to steady himself, and raced to right the ship. "Celdian is holding!" Clifton reported. "He can hit us all he likes without damaging us."

"That's easy for you to say!" DeWalt countered. "We just lost 10% of our Celdian strength. We can't just let him keep pounding us."

"Where's D'Alia?" Eckhart searched the tactical grid. His stomach dropped into his boots when he read a black Earthling body adrift in space.

A second later, D'Alia's corona flared to life, but the dark outline inside it didn't stand upright anymore.

D'Alia wavered on his hands and knees inside the corona. The instant it reappeared, he started spitting lasers at Yausqith again, but anyone could see the alien's blows weakened him a lot faster than they weakened the *Marathon*.

Eckhart opened fire again and raced the ship to get between Yausqith and D'Alia, but Yausqith anticipated the maneuver.

Eckhart couldn't counter so many arms. They sprouted from an invisible center, and they snaked through the stars like so many tentacles from a massive creature. They rippled here and there. They came close to the *Marathon*, coiled off somewhere else, and then came back in for another strike.

They looped behind the *Marathon* without touching it and smashed D'Alia again. His light vanished, but the arms kept flailing and snapping everywhere. They pounded his defenseless body and battered him all over the solar system.

"Find me something to use against that thing!" Eckhart called over to DeWalt.

"There is nothing you can use against it! The ship's instruments can hardly even pick up that it's there."

"Of course we can pick up that it's there! It's right in front of us."

"The ship's controls can't detect anything about its energetic nature. It's…it's beyond comprehension."

"I don't want to hear that, DeWalt!" Another devastating blow struck the shields, and this time, Yausqith caught the *Marathon* in one of his arms.

He started pulling the ship closer to the center. "We have a problem here!" Clifton bellowed. "If we go in there, we ain't coming out!"

"Come on, DeWalt!" Eckhart yelled. "Give me something!"

"What do I look like—a scientist? I'm not Rixby."

Eckhart froze, staring into the tactical grid. Rixby. She knew what this thing was—or she knew more about it than anyone else. She wasn't here, though. She was nowhere near this thing. She couldn't help Eckhart now. No one could.

The *Marathon* glided through space. Yausqith's arm didn't penetrate the Celdian. His grip didn't damage the ship, but that hardly mattered.

He lowered the *Marathon* closer to his center, and Eckhart looked down at nothing. There was absolutely nothing there—nothing he could fight to save his own life.

The arm curled to drop the *Marathon* into that empty place when a blaze of lightning shot past the bridge. A comet streaked across the tactical grid, and D'Alia zoomed for the arm holding the *Marathon*.

D'Alia struck so fast he severed the arm before Yausqith could

react. A shockwave went down the arm, and Eckhart fired the engines. The *Marathon* sprinted out of Yausqith's reach…except that nowhere was outside his reach anymore.

His many limbs whipped and twisted all over the place. They snapped toward D'Alia, but he flew too fast for Yausqith to hit him again. D'Alia corkscrewed back and forth, dodging the arms and whistling off somewhere else.

Yausqith made another grab for the *Marathon*, and Eckhart took a page out of D'Alia's book. He dropped the throttle down and started whizzing everywhere and anywhere to stop Yausqith from catching him again.

Eckhart and D'Alia retreated, and Yausqith snuck just a fraction of an inch nearer. D'Alia reacted instantly and dove for the alien. He veered around another four arms, skimmed close to the center, and rocketed out the other side.

Yausqith halted again, and several of his arms whorled backward to hunt D'Alia down.

"Look!" DeWalt shrieked. "Look at that!"

Eckhart checked the tactical grid. "Oh, no!"

As though his very thoughts called Rixby to him, the *Atera* and the whole alien fleet advanced on Yausqith from the other side. Thousands of ships spread out in a vast formation and approached from behind Yausqith's original route.

"No!" Eckhart yelled. "Get back! Get away from him!"

No one answered him.

"Get me the command podium on the *Atera*!"

"There's no answer," DeWalt replied. "I have no idea who's piloting the ship."

The fleet soared in behind Yausqith, came within range of his deadly arms, and skidded backward just as fast.

Yausqith halted again, lashed his arms at the alien fleet, and when he couldn't reach them, he retreated, too. He crawled back the way he came, trying to reach all those ships.

The fleet line made a few more feints to lure him backward, and he kept falling for it. He started going in the opposite direction—away from Earth.

A silent signal went through the alien fleet, and all those countless ships opened fire on Yausqith at the same time. Lasers, plasma cannons, and many other weapons erupted down the line.

Jackal Clan, Chosen, and Immortals fighters plunged into the

mix and started tracing those wild patterns between Yausqith's arms. He became more agitated by the second now that he couldn't catch and consume his prey.

Velocities launched from the *Atera* and its sister ships. They zoomed into the battle, shooting randomly at Yausqith's whipping arms, but all their shots went straight through him.

He hung motionless in space with all his arms twining and cracking in all directions. His movements became progressively disordered and confused until, without warning, he shot out a limb and snatched D'Alia out of open space.

Yausqith struck with such speed and ferocity that Eckhart never knew what he was going to do until it was too late. One moment, D'Alia soared around the battle along with the fighters and Velocitys. He flew with unmatched accuracy. He avoided every shot and Yausqith's arms never touched him.

The next instant, the arm strapped around his halo and held him. The arm sprouted more smaller appendages that knotted D'Alia's halo in an unbreakable fist.

They crushed the halo, and he collapsed inside it. Lasers fired outward in a devastating rainbow of destruction, but nothing touched the creature holding him.

D'Alia writhed inside the bubble, and the light started to fade. Yausqith pulled the asset closer to the center, preparing to devour D'Alia the same way he had almost devoured the *Marathon*.

"No!" Eckhart yelled, and dove for the creature. He unloaded his plasma on the arm holding D'Alia, but the *Marathon* couldn't help him.

Eckhart flew through the arm, but Yausqith ignored the ship. He brought D'Alia in much faster than he'd threatened the *Marathon*. D'Alia dangled right over Yausqith's hole, and every passing second faded his light even more.

"Get out of the way, Eckhart," a familiar voice called. "Get to a safe distance."

Eckhart froze. "Rixby?"

"Pull back—all ships!" she ordered. "Get away from the creature. I'll deal with Yausqith."

The alien force obeyed her, and all the fighters retreated back to their own ships. A single Velocity launched from the *Atera*.

A Nalzai sat at the Velocity's helm. She usually worked on the *Atera*'s scanners. Rixby occupied the seat behind the pilot as the

Nalzai operator steered the ship closer to Yausqith.

"I'll handle this, Eckhart," Rixby told him. "You fall back with the *Atera*."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to give Yausqith what he wants. He wants me. Get back."

"What's he going to do with you?" Eckhart didn't want to know.

"I made him a promise. I told him he could take me if he came out to help us. He helped us free you from Dhairi. Now I have to fulfill my promise. It's the only way."

"No, Rixby!" Eckhart choked. "Don't do this!"

"I have to. I'm the only one who can stop him."

"Rixby…"

"I said fall back, Eckhart!"

He opened his mouth to argue, but at that moment, Yausqith dropped D'Alia into the vacuous hole at the center of all those flailing arms. D'Alia's corona barely gave off any light anymore, and his lasers had already stopped.

The faint glimmer of his halo dropped through the hole, and at the same instant, the Nalzai pilot punched the Velocity into a full sprint.

"*No! Rixby!*" Eckhart launched out of his chair, but it was too late.

The *Atera* opened fire, but it didn't shoot at Yausqith. A Triorium ejection coiled out of the enormous battlecruiser and slammed into the *Marathon*'s Celdian shields. The impact smacked the *Marathon* away from Yausqith, and the Velocity plunged nose first into the alien's empty center.

A colossal explosion detonated outward, but Eckhart was already on his feet in the center of the tactical grid. He wanted to grab Rixby, to wrestle her back and stop her, but she wasn't there. Nothing was there but the tactical grid shining all around him.

"*Rixby! No!!*"

The next instant, the shockwave hit the shields and carried the *Marathon* far, far away. It flung Eckhart forward, and he hit the wall. He hurtled backward and hit something else before he slammed down hard on the floor.

Everything went quiet. He lay still and listened, but all sound had ceased.

He didn't get up. He never wanted to get up. He shut his eyes

and buried his face in his elbow. This couldn't be happening. He couldn't be watching each of his friends die before his eyes. Nothing was worth this.

He fought down rising despair. First Alice and now Rixby. Why?

What in the world was he doing? He never should have put them in danger. Every single day, every job, every payoff on the *Marathon* had led him to this. How could he be so callous not to realize the danger he was putting them in?

They were right about him. That officer in Zurich had been right. Eckhart was responsible for all these deaths. He was the one who'd put Alice in danger. He was the one who'd led Rixby to release Yausqith in the first place.

He would never recover from their deaths—never. He didn't want to. He wanted to die. He wanted to throw himself out of the hatch and rid the world of his obnoxious existence. The whole world would be better off without him.

His throat constricted and his eyes stung. He didn't deserve to cry over Rixby. This was all his fault.

Someone took hold of his arms and tried to pick him up. Eckhart smelled Clifton. Of course it was Clifton.

Eckhart didn't respond, but Clifton wouldn't leave him alone. When Eckhart still didn't move, Clifton called DeWalt over, and they hoisted Eckhart to his feet. He had no choice but to face this… this nightmare.

He staggered over to his chair and collapsed into it, but he didn't touch the regulators. He couldn't move. He could only stare at a spot on the floor in front of him.

He barely noticed D'Alia lying unconscious near the navigation station. He wasn't moving, but he looked undamaged. Maybe he was dead, too, but Eckhart couldn't even care about that. He never wanted to see anything ever again. He no longer wanted to feel anything or do anything or be anything. He was finished.

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17

The Chairwoman of the Intergalactic High Court leaned forward and peered down at Eckhart, Clifton, DeWalt, Short, Staton, Nuñez, Fontana, and D'Alia all sitting in front of her.

"Am I to understand, Mr. Eckhart," she asked, "that you deliberately hunted these men down with the sole intention of bringing them to Earth to offer this testimony?"

"Yes, ma'am," Eckhart replied. "As I testified, I met with them shortly after the attack on Vaebbe. I offered them the chance to turn then. I would have brought Jenks in, too, but he died shortly after that."

The Chairwoman turned to Nuñez, Fontana, and D'Alia. "You've all offered testimony that it was Mr. Eckhart's influence that convinced you to turn against the Regiment."

D'Alia cleared his throat. "Excuse me for contradicting, ma'am, but I wouldn't have turned at all if I hadn't lost my power. I'm ashamed to admit it now, but it's the truth."

Fontana didn't add his assent to this, even though it was true for him too, but the testimony of all the other men, Regiment officers, and witnesses from the square confirmed it.

None of them really had to say anything anymore. So many sworn statements stacked up from all over that the case was open and shut now. This hearing was nothing more than a formality.

Eckhart lurched through it not feeling anything. These Earthlings meant nothing to him. Not even Clifton and DeWalt meant anything to him anymore.

Eckhart hated himself. He destroyed everything he touched. He was only going through with this so he could leave when it was all over. He did it so he could get as far away as possible from everyone he cared about. That was the only way he could stand to live with himself.

The Chairwoman straightened up and leveled Eckhart with her hard, shrewd eyes. "You have all our gratitude, Mr. Eckhart. Your bravery and conscience are truly an inspiration to all humanity. The people of Earth will always be in your debt, and I know several world leaders are waiting to honor you for your actions."

His mouth said, “Thank you, ma’am,” but her words bounced right off him. None of this was worth Rixby’s life or Alice’s life. None of this was worth the life of that Groras boy or the lives of civilians lost on Yevepra, or any of the thousands of other lives lost in this war.

He didn’t even care when the Chairwoman checked in with her colleagues and leaned forward again to announce the High Court’s decision.

“The United Collateral Regiment is hereby declared an illegal organization under intergalactic law. Any Regiment officers and General Staff still at large beyond the Earth solar system will be declared outlaw and banned from reentry. They will be subject to recapture and instant execution by any entity or being of any species without recourse to the law. All guarantees of immunity and repatriation are hereby dissolved and their citizenship in the Earth United Collateral system is revoked. The High Court has ruled.”

She slammed down her gavel and the courtroom dissolved in talk. The magistrates started talking to each other. All the dignitaries, lawyers, and officials in front of the witness box started talking to each other and discussing the proceedings.

Eckhart glanced over at DeWalt, who sat next to him. “What just happened?”

DeWalt shrugged. “I’m not sure.”

Eckhart glanced down the line. Nuñez and D’Alia were talking to each other. Short and Staton both left the witness box and went into the gallery to greet their wives.

Sergeant Banks came up to Eckhart and extended his hand. “Congratulations. You did it. You’re a hero.”

“I’m not a hero. What did she mean about the Regiment still being at large beyond the Earth solar system? Aren’t they all here—on Earth?”

“I wish. Everyone was so distracted by that alien threatening Earth that a bunch of the General Staff made off with ships and their personnel.”

Eckhart gulped. “What do you mean, they ‘made off’ with them?”

“They fled. They’re on the run. They went AWOL.”

Eckhart glanced over at his friends. DeWalt and Clifton stared back at him with the same looks of blank horror. “Where did they go?” Clifton asked. “Where else is there?”

“They went to the fringes.”

Eckhart’s hand flew to his head. “Ah, hell!”

“I know,” Banks replied. “They have about a hundred ships, with probably five hundred thousand souls on board. I hate to think what will happen to them out there.”

“Aren’t you going to send someone out to bring them back?” Clifton asked. “You can’t leave them out there. These are the same people who tried to wipe out the fringes. They wouldn’t have fled if they weren’t guilty.”

“You’re right, but you heard the ruling. The whole Regiment has been disbanded. We don’t have a space force anymore—not until the international community comes up with a new one. We won’t even be able to do that without regular shipments of raw materials from the fringes. Life on Earth is gonna get a lot smaller real fast.”

“So you’re just going to leave them running wild out there?” Eckhart asked. “You’re going to let them do whatever they want? They’re free. They won’t face justice at all.”

Banks turned to Eckhart and fixed him with a long gaze. “You heard what the Chairwoman said. Anyone, from any species, can hunt them down and eliminate what’s left of the Regiment. You have an army stronger than the Regiment ever was. If you don’t want them to get away with it, why don’t you go out there and finish this? You’re the only one who can. None of us can do it.”

He waved at the three assets, Short, Staton, Clifton, DeWalt, and all the other Earthlings standing around.

The same realization struck Eckhart between the eyes. These people were weak. They were nothing but frightened little puppies hiding on their tiny planet. They had absolutely nothing to recommend themselves.

The Regiment’s might had always depended on the fringes. Earth was nothing without the fringes. What the hell was he doing here, anyway?

The last cord binding him to this planet snapped, if it had ever been there at all.

He turned to Clifton and DeWalt and held out his arms. “You boys stay out of trouble, okay? And by that, I mean stay off the fringes. Stay on Earth where you belong.”

“What are you talking about, Eckhart?” Clifton countered. “We’re going with you.”

“Oh, no!” Eckhart held up his hands. “No! You’re staying here.

You are *not* getting back on the *Marathon*—no way!"

"Why not?" DeWalt asked. "Don't tell me you don't want our help. You don't have to do this all by yourself."

"I'm not doing anything. I'm going home. This is your home. You belong here. I don't."

"How can we stay here knowing the Regiment is still out there?" Clifton asked. "We're involved in this. We want to stop the Regiment as much as you do."

"I'm not going after the Regiment. I have better things to do, and so do you." Eckhart waved them away. "Go. Go lives your lives. I'll sleep better if you stay here."

He went over to Staton and Short. Both men teared up when Eckhart said goodbye to them. Short's wife sobbed on Eckhart's shoulder, thanking him again and again for bringing Jacob home.

Eckhart finally pried himself away and took his leave from the three assets, too. They all insisted on hugging him. He tolerated it only because he knew it was temporary. He was finally leaving.

Even Banks hugged him. Eckhart had been enduring a lot of that since he'd come back here.

He finally made his escape, but when he headed for the parking lot to find the *Marathon*, Clifton and DeWalt came out of an alley and followed him.

Eckhart spun around and waved them back. "Forget it, boys! Get out of here! You aren't welcome on my ship anymore."

"You don't mean that, Eckhart," Clifton replied. "You need all the help you can get. The Regiment won't lie down and die quietly."

"I already told you, I'm not going after the Regiment. Someone else can do that—some alien who enjoys hurting people. There are a lot of them on the fringes. The Regiment won't last long. Believe me."

"You know you're going after them," DeWalt insisted. "You won't be able to leave them alone."

"No, I won't. I'm going back to Parilia where I belong. I'm officially retired."

"Who'll run Aistenz's empire?" Clifton asked.

"I don't know and I don't care. Maybe it will dissolve."

"Then the fringes will descend into chaos," DeWalt replied. "All the gangs will start fighting again, and even more people will die."

"That's someone else's problem now. I've done enough damage

for one lifetime." He turned away and started toward the ship again.

Clifton and DeWalt started walking to keep up with him. "You can't get rid of us that easily, Eckhart," DeWalt told him. "We're in this for the duration. We aren't staying behind."

"Yes, you are. The *Marathon* is my ship, and I decide who flies in it. Go home. Seriously."

He turned his back on them. They were really starting to piss him off. When would they learn to take no for an answer?

"Why won't you let us come?" Clifton asked. "We're your friends. Why won't you let us help you?"

He rounded on them and bellowed in Clifton's face. "Because you might wind up dead, okay? Is that what you want to hear? You want to go get yourselves killed? Go jump off a bridge and leave me out of it. Is that what you want? You want me to stand around and watch you die? Is that the way you show me what a great friend you are?"

Both of them stared at him in shock. Eckhart whirled away to stop them from seeing how close he came to falling apart. He'd only made it through the hearing by going numb and refusing to feel anything.

He couldn't cope with having people around him that he cared about, and who cared about him. This constant nagging fear that they would die made their presence an agony.

He couldn't stand looking at them. He went into the ship and climbed up to the bridge. He was finally alone on this ship, the way he wanted to be.

He started the engines and pretended not to see Clifton and DeWalt going into the galley. At least they left him alone.

He steered through the atmosphere and out of the Earth solar system. He deleted every message from formerly-Regiment ships in orbit. They were all on their way back to Earth to be decommissioned. He didn't want to read their messages or talk to anyone on them.

He could have set the ship on an automatic course back to rendezvous with the *Atera*, but he didn't. He piloted the ship manually. It gave him an excuse to stay on the bridge. Then he wouldn't have to deal with those two barnacles downstairs.

He hated them for coming along. He hated them for caring and for shoving his nose in the fact that he still cared. He never wanted

to care ever again, or to meet anyone who cared.

He could find all that on Parilia. No one on Parilia cared… except Dichi.

At least Dichi didn't know any of the terrible things Eckhart had done. Dichi thought Eckhart was as pure as the driven snow. Eckhart would never tell Dichi any of what he'd done off the planet.

The fleet came to meet him in its usual mixed bag of ragtag derelicts and gang fighters. Namol hailed Eckhart, and he deleted that message, too.

Eckhart headed for the *Atera* only because he needed to refuel before he left for Parilia. He'd tell Squids he was leaving. Squids could handle whatever happened next. If Eckhart played his cards right, he might be able to ditch Clifton and DeWalt on the *Atera*, too.

Then he remembered that Dallas and Bing were still on the *Atera*. Eckhart would never be able to ditch them—not without at least saying goodbye. Clifton and DeWalt, maybe. Dallas and Bing? Eckhart owed them better.

That crushing sensation snuck back into his chest when he thought about Dallas and Bing. How could he face them? They'd know about Rixby by now. They probably blamed Eckhart for her death, the same way they must blame him for Alice's death.

He braced himself, heading for the landing platform. He'd just have to face the music. Then he could leave and go about the awful business of living with himself for the rest of his miserable life.

Fortunately, that wouldn't last long on Parilia, either. Someone would find him and pay him back for something or other. It was only a matter of time.

He landed and made sure he marched past the galley without stopping or looking inside. He heard their voices and walked out before they could stop him again.

He released the hatch and walked out onto the platform. The *Atera*'s mechanical crews swarmed the *Marathon*. They would resupply it with fuel and Celdian. The ship would be ready to go as soon as Eckhart got this over with.

He headed for the elevator—and stopped in his tracks. He couldn't believe his eyes when he saw what he thought was Rixby standing before him.

She stood in the middle of the landing platform talking to Squids. She didn't see Eckhart…and then she turned around and

looked right at him.

His world wobbled on its axis again. Was he hallucinating? Was his brain so addled by emotion and stress that he made this up to comfort himself?

She wavered her antennae at him. She looked real, but he didn't trust his own senses. She couldn't be real. He'd seen her fly into Yausqith's center. No one could survive that explosion.

She left Squids' side and waddled closer, stopping halfway between Squids and Eckhart. Her antennae swayed even more when she looked up to study him.

He stared down at her. If this was a hallucination or a trick of his mind, it sure was a realistic one. He could see every strand of her fur and the expression in her eyes as she looked up at him in such familiar concern. Did he dare to believe she was real?

He took a few more steps. Her gaze followed him. "Eckhart?" she asked.

He staggered to a halt right in front of her. She looked so real! She couldn't be. He couldn't stand to believe it if he was only going to find out later that it was some cruel trick.

Her eyes drew him in. He couldn't stop staring into them. He ached so badly to believe that he really was looking into her eyes, the eyes he knew so well.

He never wanted to look away. He wanted to keep looking at her forever. He wanted to disappear into this fantasy and never come out of it.

"You brought Clifton and DeWalt back with you," she told him. "I didn't think you would. I thought you'd leave them back on Earth."

Her voice sounded so perfect. It sounded the way it did while she was alive. It spoke to him. It called him to…do something.

Eckhart couldn't bear this bone-crushing pain in his heart. He had to know, right now, once and for all, if this was real.

He tried to think of something he could do to prove it to himself, but no part of him fit with any other part of him right now.

He collapsed on his knees in front of her, and her gaze followed him. She stared straight into his soul. He couldn't deny that look. She had to be real. He couldn't survive it if she wasn't.

"What's wrong, Eckhart?" she asked.

Tears stung his eyes. He couldn't do this anymore. He raised his arms, but he didn't dare to touch her. He couldn't survive the pain

of touching her, especially if she turned out to be real. He would certainly die if she was.

She took another step toward him, and impossibly, he put his arms around her. She sank against him and he buried his face in her fur. She smelled so warm and alive and *here* that all that pain flooded out of him in tears that dampened her fur.

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1

A giant battalion of alien warships migrated out of open space and formed up in ranks across the Keilara solar system. They all extended their weapons to aim at the enemy positioned beyond the outer planets' orbit.

A hundred ships belonging to the United Collateral Regiment stood against the aliens. Seven giant Stormbreakers occupied the central position, with Colossus-class and Banshee-class fighters standing guard.

The two Buku leaders of the Immortals criminal syndicate watched from the bridge of the biggest alien warship, the *Negnorix*. "Immortals—stand ready to engage the enemy!" Nals ordered.

Nals' partner and deputy, Aerleth, worked over a station next to him. "All ships signaling readiness to engage."

"Scan the Regiment fleet. Locate their civilian population."

"The civilians are scattered throughout the fleet—mostly on the Colossuses. They're using their civilians to shield themselves."

Nals snorted. "It won't work. All guns to full power."

"Powering up."

"Open a channel to the Stormbreakers."

"Channel open."

Nals raised his voice. "In accordance with the Intergalactic High Court Ruling dated 487-29-3875, you are hereby ordered to surrender to intergalactic justice by disarming and abandoning your position. If you don't disperse immediately, we will have no choice but to exact retribution as laid out in the ruling. You are declared outlaw and your citizenship in the Earth United Collateral system has been revoked, along with any and all immunity such citizenship might have granted you. You are subjected to capture and instant execution according to the law."

Nothing happened for a moment, and Aerleth grinned at his friend. "You didn't really think they'd disarm, did you?"

"I don't kill civilians if I can help it."

"These aren't civilians. They're the Regiment—or what's left of them. These people fled justice. These are the same Regiment officers who killed thousands of aliens, and planned to kill millions

more if we didn't stop them."

Nals stiffened. "Very well. All ships—full assault!"

The alien line swept out of position. The Immortals leaders' vessel and a squadron of accessory vessels hung off from the main battle to supervise the attack.

The alien force descended on the last remnant of the Regiment force. They outnumbered the Regiment fleet by the thousands. Most of the alien warships were as big as the Stormbreakers and better gunned.

The instant Nals gave the order, the alien warships disgorged thousands of lightning-fast fighter craft who descended on the Regiment en masse. Lasers, plasma ejections, and every kind of ballistic weapon erupted. The alien assault swallowed the Regiment in gunfire. Fighter craft whizzed around the Stormbreakers, pelting every ship with dozens of shots.

Nals and Aerleth watched from their warship control room as the horde overran the Regiment position. The Stormbreakers didn't move, and the rest of the Regiment ships closed tighter under the battleships' protection.

"Why aren't they shooting?" Aerleth asked.

Nals shook his head. He couldn't stop staring at his controls. The aliens bombarded the Regiment with hundreds of shots, thousands of shots. Exploding ordnance, flickering lasers, and combusting plasma covered every Regiment hull, but none of the Regiment craft blew up. They just sat there.

"Something's wrong," Nals muttered.

Aerleth pounced on his controls. "Pull back! All ships—break off and retreat! Pull back to original positions!"

No one answered. "What's wrong?" Nals asked.

Aerleth scrambled over his instruments. "There's no response."

"Can they hear you?"

"I'm not sure. Our line of communication is completely cut off."

The alien force assaulted the Regiment even more ferociously. They deluged the Regiment in such a devastating carpet of fire that nothing could stand against them—except that the Regiment did. The Colossuses didn't return fire, and the Banshees didn't leave their positions. They didn't spring forward to engage the aliens. They just sat there taking a pounding.

Aerleth entered another combination of orders into his controls. "Our shots aren't doing any damage."

“That’s impossible!” Nals countered.

“Check for yourself. Nothing is penetrating, and the Regiment isn’t returning fire. They aren’t even moving.”

“What’s wrong with them?” Nals croaked.

“Hold on. There’s something going on with the Stormbreakers.”

Both leaders switched their readouts to the giant Stormbreakers. They still didn’t move or fire their weapons, but something was definitely changing. Their energy signatures elevated, and then both leaders stared at the image feed coming from the seven battleships.

Something like sparks shimmered on the Stormbreakers’ enormous sides. It rippled outward from an invisible point deep inside the ships. It spread to the Stormbreakers’ hulls until a rain of glistening lights flickered all over their sides. The shining substance flashed outward and started to dissipate into space itself.

“What the hell is that?” Nals whispered.

“It doesn’t match any known scientific substance. It shouldn’t even exist. In fact, our sensors are having difficulty detecting it.”

Nals waved toward the image. Whatever it was, it was definitely there. He could see it with his own eyes. It started with the Stormbreakers and then widened into space, surrounding the other Regiment ships until it flowed all the way to the end of the line.

“Pull back!” Nals ordered. “Get them out of there!”

“Communications are still down. Two of our warships are overloading their engines. They’re trying to break away, but they can’t. Whatever that is, it’s holding them in place. They’re trapped!”

The two leaders gaped in open-mouthed shock at the scene unfolding before them. The alien horde buzzed around the Regiment vessels even more frantically. Their fire intensified, and now both leaders could clearly see the aliens fighting to escape.

That glowing whatever-it-was held them fast against their best efforts to break free. The sparks filled all the space between the alien vessels. It didn’t stop them from flying, or from landing as many hits on the Regiment as before, but the aliens couldn’t retreat.

Nals and Aerleth watched in horror as the shining pinpricks of light got brighter by the second. They started to increase their glow on the Stormbreaker hulls. It built until the seven Stormbreakers blazed with light. They radiated that mysterious energy, brighter than any star.

The dots between the alien ships vibrated to the same frequency. A sea of light surrounded the alien horde until the attack force

hovered suspended in a pulsating river of light and energy.

Ten warships converged on the Stormbreakers. They must have realized they could only break out by working together. They concentrated their laser power on the central Stormbreaker and unleashed a hellish barrage on the enemy.

Their combined lasers struck the Stormbreaker's hull and set off a chain reaction through the field. The outward-breaking wave swallowed all the alien ships.

"No!" Nals bellowed, but it was too late. The light flashed outward and then contracted back inside the Stormbreakers. The battlefield went dark, and then a colossal shockwave pulsed in the blackness.

It enveloped the whole solar system before it imploded back into the Stormbreakers. It sucked every alien vessel along with it, and they hurtled toward the Stormbreakers in an all-powerful vortex.

The massive horde shrank to nothing, until the entire force of thousands had evaporated inside the Stormbreakers.

Aerleth opened his mouth to speak, but no sound came out. Everyone on the bridge stared at the empty place where the alien army had been only moments before.

Nothing remained but the Regiment line. It covered the Keilara solar system in exactly the same position it had held when the Immortals first showed up.

Nals didn't move either. A dangerous silence fell over the bridge, and then, like something out of a nightmare, the same subtle shine started to radiate outward from inside the Stormbreakers.

"Retreat!" Nals roared. "Full reverse! Get us out of here!"

His bridge staff scrambled over their controls to draw the *Negnorix* out of harm's way, but anyone could see it was no good. All the accessory vessels that attended the Immortals fleet throttled in reverse, too. They skidded out of line, and several whirled around to sprint away into space.

Aerleth worked to his utmost to bring the *Negnorix*'s engines online. "It's building up to the same frequency."

"Don't tell me that!" Nals roared. "Just get us out of here!"

Too late. The sparks shimmered brighter and then exploded out of the Regiment position. They rocketed across the solar system in the blink of an eye and swallowed the Immortals.

A few accessory vessels got away fast enough, but the *Negnorix* got trapped in the wave. That mysterious energy enveloped the

warships and held them fast.

“Our engines are overloading!” Aerleth called. “We can’t overcome it!”

“We have to!” Nals countered. “Fire on it! Break us out of its grip.”

“*No!*” Aerleth roared, but one of the bridge staff had already opened up with the plasma cannons.

The bombardment stabbed into the wave, and a gargantuan explosion burst from the spot. The shot didn’t hit anything solid, but the response came swift and sure.

A massive popping bubble of energy detonated outward, carrying all the remaining ships with it. Then, at some invisible limit, the wave imploded with a giant sucking force. It snatched every alien ship out of thin air and they all vanished inside the Stormbreakers.

They left the Keilara solar system empty and peaceful, except for the Regiment line standing silent and alone where the Immortals had found them.

No one came to bother the Regiment again. They had the whole sector to themselves.

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2

An alarm shrieked on the command podium of the battlecruiser *Atera*. Rixby hopped over the controls and stepped on a few buttons. Her long fingers darted over the instruments in a flurry.

"It's a distress call! It's from a stranded freighter coming into this system." She looked up, and her antennae waved at Adam Eckhart. "The ship belongs to the Immortals."

"What's an Immortals freighter doing out *here*?" Blake Clifton asked from another workstation, formerly occupied by Rixby. "They usually stick to their own lanes."

"This one is out of fuel," Rixby replied. "It's been adrift for days. Its distress signal is on an emergency channel. That's why we didn't pick it up sooner. The ship was too far away."

"Contact Nals and Aerleth," Eckhart ordered. "See if the Immortals have a freighter in this part of space that's unaccounted for."

"I'm hailing their warship. There's no answer."

Eckhart frowned at her. "That isn't right."

"Their last known location was the Keilara system."

Eckhart stiffened. "That's impossible. They wouldn't…"

"It looks like they did," Clifton confirmed. "They registered as en route to the Keilara sector yesterday with more than two thousand Immortals attack craft. Now they're gone. There's no trace of them."

Eckhart looked down at the instruments under Rixby's feet. She was bringing up the same Immortals itinerary Clifton was looking at. Eckhart could see for himself that they were telling the truth.

"The Regiment line is still in the same place," Coleman DeWalt added from the scanner operator's station. "There's no trace of debris or damaged material in the system. Everything's peaceful."

"Then where's the Immortals attack force?" Clifton asked. "They didn't just evaporate."

"The freighter is within range," Rixby added. "What do you want to do about it?"

"Bring it in. Who's on board?"

Rixby checked something else. "Just one pilot—a Thileria male."

She took the helm. As long as Eckhart was on the bridge, he should have been the one to steer the ship and man the battlecruiser's guns, but he was too happy to get Rixby back alive to argue about something as trivial as that.

She steered the *Atera* to intercept the freighter, turning the ship backward to point the battlecruiser's rear hatch into the freighter's path.

Eckhart left the bridge, and a second later, Rixby, Clifton, and DeWalt joined him in the elevator along with Squids, Eckhart's majordomo.

They rode down to the landing platform, where Arick Bing met them. "What's going on?" he asked.

"Something happened to the Immortals," Rixby replied.

"Why am I here, then?" Bing asked. "You'll need a lot more than one Yakit to treat them all."

"We don't want to treat them all," DeWalt told him. "Just one."

Bing raised his eyebrows, but just then, the *Atera*'s hatch boomed open. The freighter floated toward the *Atera* in a slow, steady rotation, without engine power or any steering capability.

Someone on the bridge adjusted the *Atera*'s position so the freighter drifted straight into the hatch. It glided through the protective pressure bubble and crashed down hard on the platform.

Armed soldiers came forward to open up the freighter's sealed hull. A few bumps and other sounds came from inside the ship.

As soon as they opened the hatch and stood back out of the way, the lone pilot staggered out. He tripped on the ramp and fell flat on his face. Eckhart and his friends surrounded him, and Eckhart turned the man over.

His usually blue skin had gone pale during his long journey through space without power. Most of the cilia on his eyes had retracted inside his head.

"Gone!" he rasped. "All gone!"

"Where did they go?" Eckhart asked. "What happened to the Immortals attack force?"

"Gone!" the pilot choked again. "All gone!"

"How? What happened to them?"

"The Regiment."

Eckhart opened his mouth to say something else. None of this made sense. The Immortals should have made short work of what little remained of the Regiment.

The Regiment had been cut off not just from Earth, but from all the resources Earth had been taking from the fringes. The Regiment fugitives would never be able to stand against the aliens' firepower.

"Can you help him, Bing?" DeWalt asked. "He looks like he's in bad shape."

"He's malnourished and dehydrated." Bing bent over the pilot and examined his eyes. "Eplite won't fix what's wrong with him. He needs food and water."

"Take him to the medical bay," Eckhart told him. "Do what you can for him."

"Gone!" the pilot croaked again. "All gone!"

"Did you see what happened?" Eckhart asked. "How did the Regiment defeat the Immortals?"

"Gone! All gone!"

"This is getting nowhere," Clifton remarked.

Bing picked up the pilot. "He is, though."

He carried the pilot away and left Eckhart and his friends alone. Rixby went into the freighter, and Eckhart heard her squeak. "Can you find any record of what happened?"

"There's a record of the Immortals confronting the Regiment," she answered. "Nals gave them an ultimatum, and then the record cuts off. That's all. There's nothing here."

"There has to be something," Clifton countered.

"It's pretty obvious what happened," DeWalt added. "They're gone. That's all."

"But how?" Clifton asked.

"Does it matter?" Eckhart turned back to the elevator. "They're gone, and we have to make the best of it."

Rixby followed him. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to contact the Immortals. If Nals and Aerleth are gone, the Immortals will need new leadership—and so will we."

He went back upstairs to the bridge. Rixby clambered onto the podium next to him and started pressing every button. "Who are you going to contact? Nals and Aerleth were in charge of the Immortals. The whole gang will be in an uproar once they find out their leaders are gone."

"I know someone I can contact on Chanus K4."

Rixby worked away for a while. Eckhart kept scanning the Keilara system again and again without finding anything.

The Regiment ships weren't reading anything out of the

ordinary, either. They had about five thousand Earthling life signatures spread through a hundred ships. That was it. Eckhart didn't even pick up any weapons activity in the system. What the hell was going on?

Rixby finally got through to the person Eckhart wanted to talk to. She opened a channel with Chanus K4, and a large, rotund alien appeared on Eckhart's podium.

"What do you want, Eckhart?" Greenish-blue finger-like tentacles wavered in continuous swirling patterns from the creature's face.

"You must be in contact with the Immortals leadership, Sanzor."

"Vuldak Dhaddet was the leader of the Immortals until you killed him, Eckhart," Sanzor hissed. "I would kill you myself if I knew where you were."

"Vuldak was never more than the Immortals' representative—and I didn't kill Vuldak, Sanzor. Chyke killed Vuldak for treachery to the fringe cause."

"*Your* cause, Eckhart. Nals and Aerleth are the leaders of the Immortals now, thanks to you. I don't have anything to do with them."

"I had nothing to do with Nals and Aerleth taking over the Immortals, Sanzor, but that isn't why I'm contacting you. We've lost contact with Nals and Aerleth. Their fleet vanished en route to intercept what's left of the Regiment."

"So?" Sanzor demanded. "I'm not even in the Immortals' hierarchy."

"But you're in contact with them. You can inform them that Nals and Aerleth are gone. The Immortals will either want to search for them or replace them."

"I don't care if they do."

Eckhart lost patience with this insignificant middleman. "You'd better *start* caring, Sanzor. The Immortals are under my authority now, which means that Vuldak's former network, all his resources, and all his operations are also under my authority, too." He checked something Rixby was showing him. "My records indicate you're running Vuldak's operation in his place. If you don't do as I say, I'll have no choice but to come after you to enforce my position over you…and we wouldn't want that, would we, Sanzor?"

Sanzor muttered something under his breath.

"I didn't hear that, Sanzor, and I don't want to hear it. Contact

the Immortals and tell them they either need to find Nals and Aerleth, or else send out replacements for them. I'm having another meeting between all the gang leaders in three days. The Immortals will need a new representative by then, if they haven't found Nals and Aerleth."

Sanzor muttered again, and finally said in a much clearer voice, "Very well, Eckhart. I will contact them."

"Thank you. I never liked Chanus K4. I only ever went there to do business with Vuldak. I wouldn't be happy if I ever had to go back there again."

He motioned to Rixby, who cut the line. Eckhart became aware of everyone on the bridge staring at him.

"You're really scary, you know that?" DeWalt murmured.

"I'm supposed to be taking over for Aistenz Trotaer. He would've cut Sanzor's balls off before he tolerated anyone talking to him like that. I guess I've been too nice to everyone for too long."

"People have been telling you that for years," Rixby chirped.

"What do *you* say?" Eckhart asked her. "Do you think I'm too nice?"

"To me? No. To people like Sanzor? Definitely."

Eckhart laughed, and Clifton and DeWalt joined in. "I guess I better change that, now that I'm supposed to be in charge of everybody."

"It sounds like you already are," DeWalt remarked.

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3

Eckhart walked into the *Atera*'s medical ward and found Bing working on a giant computer panel set into the wall "What did you want to see me about?"

"This." Bing pointed to a huge schematic displayed on the large flat screen.

It showed the outline of an Earthling body, with about a fifth of an organic brain and almost nothing else. Circuitry filled the rest of the outline. Conduits of Datrium plasma streamed from the reservoir, through a pump converter, to every other part of the mechanical form.

"What's the problem?" Eckhart asked. "He looks normal to me."

"Not quite. See this?" Bing traced one of his many limbs around the outer edge of the image. "The Crionium in his armor is becoming charged with an electromagnetic frequency that was never there before."

"What's causing it?"

"This." Bing pointed to something throbbing in the center of the figure's chest. "It's become melded to the rest of his circuitry. It's rewriting his operating system and reconfiguring most of his components."

Eckhart stared at the anionic elasticity quantatid positioned behind Dallas Eldridge's chest plate. It no longer even looked like the device Rixby had taken from the *Marathon*. It had evolved into something unrecognizable.

Bing turned away and led Eckhart across the medical bay. Dallas' giant robotic frame sat on one of the exam tables.

Dallas turned his glossy metal helmet one way and then the other. He usually did that when he was either scanning something or researching something in his cerebral archive. His single optical lens made him look more robot than Earthling—which he was.

"How you doing, buddy?" Eckhart raised his arm to clap his friend on the shoulder.

Bing shot out a hand and yanked Eckhart's arm away. "Don't touch him! His armor will electrocute you."

Eckhart stared back and forth between his two friends. "How's

that even possible?"

"You got me. I've never heard of anything like this…but then again, there's never been anyone like Dallas—ever. No one could have anticipated the quantatid reacting to his system like this."

"Can't you do anything about it?"

"Not unless you want whoever tries to do anything about it to get electrocuted, too. None of us can touch him. *He's* the only person who can touch him, and I don't think we can ask him to operate on himself."

Eckhart stared at Bing and then turned back to Dallas. He had to restrain himself from touching his friend. He'd become so accustomed to treating Dallas just like an ordinary man. Now he had to rewrite everything he'd ever known about or done around this man.

"Are you feeling all right, pal?"

"I feel fine, Eckhart," Dallas replied. "I feel perfectly normal."

"All his systems are functioning normally," Bing began, and then corrected himself. "Or I should say, all his systems are functioning beyond optimal. He's beyond peak functioning. He's…" Bing trailed off. Both he and Eckhart stared at Dallas. Eckhart couldn't think of anything to say.

"You don't have to worry, Eckhart," Dallas told him. "There's nothing wrong with me. You don't have to treat me like I'm dying."

"How do we know?" Eckhart asked. "How do we know this won't start affecting you?"

"It's already affecting me, and in the best possible way. This is a good thing."

"How can you be sure? How do you know it won't overload your systems?"

"It isn't," Bing cut in. "That's what I'm trying to tell you. The quantatid is reconfiguring his systems to compensate for the energy surge. It's adjusting all his reactions and responses so he doesn't overload."

"But if he's using energy so much faster, he'll run through his Datrium reserves faster. He'll need twice as much fuel—or however much more he's using."

"That's the thing. The quantatid is replicating the Datrium already in his reservoir. It's recycling the Datrium he already has on board so he never has to replace it."

Eckhart blinked down at Bing in stupid shock. "Are you saying

he'll have an unlimited supply forever?"

Bing nodded. "Exactly. He'll never have to refuel again."

Eckhart went back to studying Dallas. "What about this frequency going through his armor?"

"It's realigning the crystalline structure of the Crionium. His armor is becoming impossibly strong—probably strong enough to withstand the vacuum of space."

"That's why I asked Bing to call you here, Eckhart," Dallas cut in. "I want to test it out, but Bing insisted on getting your permission first. He's worried my armor won't be able to withstand the depressurization. He thinks I might get crushed."

"You *want* to go out in space?" Eckhart repeated. "Unprotected?"

"The field protects him," Bing explained. "Or it should… theoretically."

"My armor is already capable of withstanding the pressures exerted against the *Atera*'s hull," Dallas replied. "I'm quite certain I won't damage myself. I wouldn't suggest it if I wasn't certain."

Eckhart shut his eyes and covered his face. "So…wait a second. You're saying this frequency makes your armor strong enough to go out in space…and you want to test it out."

"That's right."

Eckhart puffed out his cheeks and turned to Bing. "And you say it's theoretically likely that his armor really has changed that much?"

Bing shrugged. "I'm relying on his internal sensors. His operating system takes much more accurate readings on his condition than we can ever hope to take. He says the pressure tolerance of his armor has increased that much, and I believe him. I just didn't want to, you know, risk it."

Eckhart threw up his hands. "Well, who am I to stand in the way of a young man's education? Go test it if you want to."

"Are you sure, Eckhart?" Dallas asked.

"You say you're sure, so yeah. I'm sure. Go do it. What the hell do we have to lose, right?"

"We have Dallas to lose," Bing countered.

Dallas got off the table. Eckhart and Bing took a step back to put plenty of space between him and them. "You won't lose me, Bing. My pressure tolerance exceeds the *Atera*'s hull now. I'll prove it to you."

“Do you want us to go with you?”

“You don’t have to.”

Dallas stomped out of the medical bay. “Are we making a big mistake?” Eckhart whispered to Bing.

“I trust him. I just…I’m not sure what to do about this. Not that we could do anything, even if I did know.”

“How did this happen?” Eckhart asked.

Bing shrugged. “I have no idea. The only thing I can think of is to contact Platanistoidea Havilm. He manufactured Dallas’ prosthetics. He should know about this, but I doubt he anticipated anything like this.”

“We’d better go see how the test goes.”

The two friends got into the elevator. Fortunately, Dallas had already gone ahead, so they didn’t have to worry about accidentally bumping into him.

They found him on the landing platform. He opened the hatch and, without any preparation at all, he fired the jet thrusters in his feet.

He lifted off the floor and soared outside. He zoomed through the stars, and even fired his assault guns a few times.

Eckhart had to remind himself that Dallas no longer had to worry about running out of Datrium. This whole thing defied the laws of physics, but like Bing said, nothing like Dallas had ever happened before.

Dallas came swooping back and landed on the platform. He trooped over to where Eckhart and Bing stood. “Are you satisfied now, Bing?”

“Satisfied that you’re becoming even more of a freak than you already were? You bet, buddy. I’m satisfied.”

Dallas laughed. It was the same laugh Eckhart knew from their years together on the *Marathon*.

Then Dallas cocked his helmet to one side. “The electromagnetic frequency in my armor has changed again. You can touch me now without harming yourselves.”

“Are you sure?” Eckhart asked.

“We should probably check on that in the medical bay before we test it out,” Bing added.

“You’re right,” Eckhart replied. “We wouldn’t want any accidents to—”

Dallas raised his mechanical arm and clamped it on Eckhart’s

shoulder. His robotic fingers crushed Eckhart in a death grip.

Bing screamed and lunged forward to stop him, but a second later, Dallas' armor made contact with Eckhart. Dallas' fingers grazed Eckhart's neck. Nothing happened.

Bing wilted with a shaky sigh. "Don't do that!"

"I told you it's perfectly safe." Dallas inclined his helmet the other way. "My assault guns are more powerful now, too."

"How is this going to end?" Eckhart asked. "How far will the quantatid go to rewrite your systems?"

"I don't think there's any end to what it can do." Dallas tilted his head back the other way. "It's taking over my organic brain. It's replacing my neural connections with hardware."

"But…won't that eliminate your personality?"

"It shouldn't. I'm still standing here talking to you."

"How do we know for certain?" Bing asked. "How do we know you won't completely disappear? Your organic brain is pretty much all that's left of your original being. You'd become nothing but a robot."

Dallas turned to him and studied Bing for a moment before he said, "A man walks into a bar, walks up to the bartender, and says, 'Give me a shot of your best high-grade motor oil.' The bartender looks at him and says, 'Hey, buddy, we don't serve the hard stuff in here. For that, you need to go to the shipyard down the road.' And the guy says, 'Hey, you already served my girlfriend, and now she's fully automated.'"

Eckhart and Bing both stared at him for a second while Eckhart tried to figure out what was funny about that joke.

All at once, he got it, and he exploded in laughter. "All right, pal. You proved your point."

He clapped Dallas on the shoulder before he realized he shouldn't be doing that, but it was too late. He'd already made contact with Dallas' armor with his bare hand.

Eckhart and Bing froze, but nothing happened.

Dallas turned back to Bing. "Are we finished? Do I really have to go back to the medical bay so you can run more tests?"

"I guess not," Bing answered. "Just…let me know if anything changes."

"It's always changing." Dallas started to turn away, and then cocked his head again. "Rixby is asking to see you, Eckhart. She says it's important. She says another alien group is going after the

Regiment."

"Tell her I'm on my way up to the bridge right now."

Dallas marched off somewhere, and Eckhart and Bing went back to the elevator.

Eckhart thought over all the changes going on with Dallas. Should he do anything about it? *Could* he do anything it?

Dallas didn't seem too concerned about this, and like Bing said, Dallas would know better than anyone.

Bing woke Eckhart from his thoughts. "What was so funny about that joke? I didn't see anything funny in it at all."

Eckhart chuckled. "It wasn't. That was the point."

"I don't get it. It wasn't funny."

"Don't you see? He's still joking, so he must be the same. The quantatid is replacing his organic brain with circuitry, but he can still joke about being fully automated and wanting high-grade motor oil to become fully automated like his girlfriend." Eckhart laughed again. He couldn't stop himself.

"He doesn't even have a girlfriend."

Eckhart hugged his sides and wiped away tears of laughter. "I know! That's the point. He's still there. He's still the same person. The quantatid isn't replacing him. Maybe it can't…or maybe electronic circuitry will only reproduce the person who's already there."

Bing frowned again. "I don't get it."

Eckhart exploded in even more uncontrollable laughter. "Don't think about it too hard. We won't be able to replace *your* circuitry with a quantatid."

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4

Eckhart walked onto the bridge. “What’s going on?”

“Another fleet is moving on the Regiment,” Rixby informed him.

“Who is it? Is it the Immortals again?”

“This group doesn’t belong to any gang. It’s just a random bunch of aliens out for revenge. They’re survivors from Regiment massacres all over the place.”

“How long will it take us to get to the Keilara solar system?”

“At least twenty minutes.”

“Get us over there. We have to stop them before they disappear like the Immortals did.”

Rixby hit the throttle. The *Atera*, three more battlecruisers, and all the other alien vessels of Eckhart’s fleet took off into space on a dead sprint for the Keilara system.

“Bring up whatever visuals you have on the battle,” Eckhart told DeWalt.

“It looks like these guys already know what happened to the Immortals,” Clifton announced. “They’re dropping their supply train out of range.”

DeWalt patched a scanner feed to the command podium, and Eckhart surveyed the impending disaster. An even bigger horde than the Immortals was already moving into the Keilara system. Unlike the Immortals, though, this group left at least five hundred supply freighters, civilian transport craft, and communications rigs hanging around in the next system over.

The attack vessels advanced on the Regiment line. The Stormbreakers, Colossuses, and Banshees still occupied the same positions they’d been in when Eckhart and his friends had left Earth. The remnant Regiment hadn’t budged since the High Court had ruled that any alien from any species could wipe them out with impunity.

“Are you picking up anything unusual about the Regiment ships?” Eckhart asked DeWalt.

DeWalt shook his head. “Nothing. They shouldn’t have been able to stand up to the Immortals. They should all have been wiped out, but the Regiment ships haven’t even taken any damage.”

“They all have full loads of fuel, too,” Rixby added. “They’re running on minimal power.”

“Which means they didn’t use any Datrium or Celdian to defend themselves against the Immortals,” Eckhart finished. “This is really weird.”

“Listen to this.” DeWalt did something else on his controls, and a scratchy voice came over the communications system.

“Regiment vessels, you are hereby ordered to surrender according to the Intergalactic High Court ruling dated 487-29-3875. You are ordered to surrender your weapons and prepare to be boarded for immediate execution, in accordance with the sentence for your crimes against the alien fringes. Resistance will be met with instant destruction of your vessels without warning.”

“Sounds familiar,” Clifton remarked.

“They’re advancing!” DeWalt reported. “The alien fleet is entering the Keilara system. They’re arming.”

“Anything from the Regiment yet?” Eckhart asked.

“They haven’t powered up their guns.”

“They aren’t even activating Celdian shielding,” Clifton added. “They don’t really plan to just sit there and let themselves be destroyed, do they?”

“The aliens are opening fire!” DeWalt called. “They’re deploying Velocities.”

Eckhart watched the alien fleet assaulting the Regiment in a blinding whirl of gunfire. In seconds, the alien horde blocked the Regiment completely from view.

“Step on it, Rixby,” Eckhart ordered. “How much longer before we can intercept them?”

“Ten minutes.”

“Can’t we fly any faster?”

“Hold it!” Rixby said. “The Stormbreakers are doing something.”

Eckhart looked down at the feed, and the hair stood up on the back of his neck. A shimmer of light flashed across the Stormbreakers’ hulls and started to spread. “What the hell is *that*?”

“No idea,” Rixby said. “It doesn’t match any known scientific phenomenon.”

“I’m getting really sick and tired of hearing that. It has to be *some*thing.”

“It *does* match something,” DeWalt countered. “It matches the experimental assets the Regiment developed. The Stormbreakers are

using the same energy type we saw on Earth when all three assets joined together into one force."

"Are you saying…?"

Eckhart broke off as the *Atera* advanced on the Keilara system. The battlecruiser was still five minutes away when a massive flash erupted from the Stormbreakers. It flung all the alien ships outward and then imploded to suck them in.

The *Atera* plunged through the adjacent system on a dead sprint for the battle—or what used to be a battle. "Holy shit!" Clifton whispered.

"Hang on!" Rixby squealed as the light shining on the Stormbreakers' hulls flashed even more brightly. It erupted outward in a narrow beam that blasted deep into space. It smashed into one of the supply freighters parked in the next system.

"Get back!" Eckhart ordered. "Get out of range!"

"We don't know what that thing's range is!" DeWalt called back. "It could be unlimited."

Eckhart started to give the order to withdraw again when another deadly shot ripped out of the Stormbreakers. The seven Stormbreakers at the center of the Regiment line all fired simultaneously. Their beams joined into one wicked laser that pelted another three alien ships, these loaded with civilians and refugees.

"To hell with it!" Eckhart roared. "Get in there! Attack!"

Rixby punched the throttle and activated the Triorium drive at the same time. She sprinted into the path of those beams, and they smashed into the Triorium field.

"We can't hit them from here!" DeWalt called.

"You saw what happened!" Clifton argued. "All the aliens pounded the Stormbreakers from short range. They didn't make a dent."

"That explains why the Immortals couldn't damage them, either."

Rixby yelped and almost fell off the podium in her effort to hold the helm steady. "Any ideas? We can't just stay here forever!"

"The aliens are withdrawing!" Clifton replied. "They're breaking away."

"Hold hard!" Eckhart ordered. "There has to be a way to defeat them."

"Someone is launching from our landing platform!" Rixby

squealed again. “It’s Dallas!”

“*No!*” Eckhart roared. “Get him back here!”

“He isn’t responding.”

A silver streak hurtled down the beam away from the *Atera*. It vanished into the Keilara system on a breakneck course for the Stormbreakers.

A second later, Dallas veered into the laser’s path and broke the beam. “He’s blocking it!” Rixby reported. “He’s defending our retreat.”

“We aren’t retreating! Get in there! Bring him back.”

“I don’t think—”

Just then, a giant explosion went off somewhere up ahead. The laser shattered into a million pinpricks that scattered through space. They hovered in midair for a second, and then an almighty thump blasted them all outward with a bone-shaking boom. The concussion caught Dallas and hurled him head over heel as far as the *Atera*.

“Bring him in! Get him back here and order him to withdraw,” Eckhart snapped.

“Dallas!” Rixby called into her controls. “Pull back! You can’t beat them like this. We can find another way.”

Dallas hung in space just beyond the *Atera*’s nose. He gazed toward the Regiment line, which remained as undamaged and untouchable as ever.

Eckhart held his breath to see if Dallas would attack again. If he decided to wage his own crusade against the Regiment, Eckhart couldn’t stop him. Eckhart couldn’t think of anything that could stop him. Hell, Dallas might be the only one who *could* defeat the Regiment now.

He didn’t attack again, though. He turned away and returned to the *Atera*.

Rixby’s voice shook. “He’s back inside. He’s on his way up here. He says he wants to see you.”

Eckhart nodded dully and climbed down from the podium. Rixby steered the *Atera* out of the Keilara system. In a moment, she turned and streaked away to safety.

Eckhart waited by the elevator. The doors opened, and Dallas stepped onto the bridge. “You okay?” Eckhart asked.

“Why didn’t you let me go after them?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe because I care about you and I don’t

want to see you get killed?"

"I wouldn't have."

Eckhart bit his tongue and waved behind him. "Come over here for a minute."

He led Dallas to the conference room next to the bridge. Rixby, Clifton, and DeWalt all watched them go through the door.

Eckhart rounded on his friend. "Look. I realize you're a lot stronger and more resilient than you used to be, but you can't just go throwing yourself in front of every gun that's aimed at us."

"Why not?"

Eckhart threw up his hands and smacked his lips in exasperation. "Because you can't! If you keep doing that, I won't let you off the ship at all."

Even as he said those words, he realized how stupid they sounded. He'd never be able to stop Dallas from doing anything.

Dallas cocked his head to one side. "Maybe I should wage my own campaign against the Regiment. Then you won't worry so much about being responsible for my safety."

"This has nothing to do with me being responsible for your safety, you jackass!" Eckhart practically bellowed. "I care about you!"

"I know that, Eckhart, but we have a war to win here, and it isn't over until the Regiment gets destroyed. You should use me as a weapon, not try to protect me."

Eckhart compressed his lips to stop himself from saying what he was really thinking.

"You're thinking I'm not a weapon and that you couldn't use me as one. You're thinking individual people are more important than exacting revenge on the Regiment," Dallas said.

"Well, it's true. If we don't look out for individual people, what's the point of defeating the Regiment at all? We'd be as bad as them if we did that. *I'd* be as bad as them if I used you as a weapon. I'd be doing the same thing the Regiment did with those men they experimented on."

Dallas nodded. "I knew you would say that." He turned toward the door. "I better handle this on my own. You wage your war against the Regiment, and I'll wage mine. What I do doesn't concern you anymore."

"No!" Eckhart dove in front of him to block Dallas from leaving the room. "You can't leave! Look, we're friends, okay? Is this the

quantatid? Is the quantatid changing you to make you care more about defeating the Regiment than about your own safety?"

"My safety isn't in jeopardy, Eckhart. My safety wasn't in jeopardy at all just now. That's where you're mistaken."

"What about that explosion? It sent you away from the Regiment line."

"It threw me away, but it didn't damage me. Don't you see? This EM frequency protects me from whatever weapon the Regiment is using. The Regiment's weapon can't penetrate the field, so it can't damage me."

Eckhart frowned. "Are you sure?"

"I'm the only one who can go after them…and I have to go after them. We all have to. We can't just leave them sitting there carrying on with whatever they're doing. That isn't justice. They've already killed thousands, and they'll keep killing everyone who comes near them. You might want to give up, Eckhart, but you can't. You're responsible for this."

"I know that, pal. You don't have to remind me."

"Then you have to realize that I'm responsible for this, too. I used to be in the Regiment. I participated in the Battle of Borth. I got injured in the battle. I'm like this because of acts I committed for the Regiment against the aliens. That makes the Regiment my business. If you don't use me as a weapon, I'll have to go out on my own. That's all there is to it."

Eckhart let out a shaky breath. "All right. Just…don't leave."

"You're too soft, Eckhart. You're too soft to run the rebellion, and you're too soft to run Aistenz's empire. Someone's going to come along and kill you and take everything you have. As soon as the aliens find out that you don't have the spine to get rid of the Regiment, they'll turn against you, too. Your only hope is to become hard enough to get the job done."

Eckhart hesitated and then sighed again. "All right. I'll do it."

"Good. Make sure you do."

Eckhart thought fast. He had to change everything he knew about Dallas. This wasn't a man. It wasn't one of Eckhart's last best friends.

Dallas wouldn't stand Eckhart trying to protect him, so he had to do exactly what Dallas said. Eckhart had to use him as a weapon.

"All right," Eckhart said again. "Tell me what you can do."

"I can adjust this frequency field going through my armor to

match the energy coming from the Stormbreakers. I can disrupt the energy field and even draw it to me. I can concentrate the weapon around myself while you and the rest of the fleet destroy as many Regiment ships as possible."

Eckhart opened his mouth, then stopped himself from asking Dallas if he was sure he could survive that. Dallas wouldn't suggest it if he wasn't sure, and even if he wasn't, he was a weapon—a tool. He was a device, not a person. Dallas didn't want Eckhart treating him as a person anymore.

Just then, the communications system chirped. "The gang leaders are coming in for your meeting, Eckhart. The Immortals are sending their new leader out to meet you."

"Rendezvous with them. I'm on my way." Eckhart started to turn away, and this time, Dallas stopped him.

Dallas blocked Eckhart with one arm, leaned in, and murmured low in Eckhart's face. "Listen to me, Eckhart. This is important. When the Regiment weapon is concentrated on me and you've eliminated all the smaller vessels like Colossuses and Banshees, you'll need to fire a Triorium blast at me."

"No!" Eckhart gasped. "I can't!"

Dallas held up a hand to silence him. "You have to. The blast will ricochet off my armor, and all the energy will feed back to the Stormbreakers. It's the only way to defeat this weapon they're using. The weapon will protect the Stormbreakers. The only way to break its power is to make it feed back, and the only way to do that is to fire on me when all the energy is concentrated on me. Do you understand?"

Eckhart nodded, too stunned to make a sound.

"Don't tell the others. Don't tell Rixby. She'll only freak out, and she'll try to stop this plan. Just do it on your own. Don't tell anyone what you're going to do. Just shoot. Understand?"

Eckhart stared up into Dallas' optical lens. He couldn't be hearing this. Dallas planned to sacrifice himself. This was his way of using himself as a weapon against the Regiment.

All thought that the quantatid might be reprogramming Dallas' personality evaporated out of Eckhart's mind. The quantatid hadn't done this.

That lame joke Dallas came up with didn't even scratch the surface of who and what he was. No machine, no matter how sophisticated, could come up with this plan.

The quantatid would never make Dallas feel responsible for stopping the Regiment. The quantatid didn't make him feel guilty for things he'd done when he was in the Regiment.

This was 100% pure Dallas—nothing else. He must have been carrying that guilt for years. He must have been searching for some way to clear his conscience for things he'd done decades ago. Now he'd found it.

The quantatid also didn't make Dallas exact Eckhart's promise to keep it a secret. No machine would try to protect Rixby and the others from finding out what Dallas wanted to do. That was all him.

Dallas studied him for a second and then turned back to the door. He walked out and left Eckhart standing there in turmoil.

Losing Alice was bad enough. Did winning this war mean standing by and watching all his friends die?

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5

Eckhart, Rixby, Squids, Bing, Clifton, DeWalt, and Dallas stood on the landing platform watching the Jackal Clan and Chosen transport craft drift down to land in the *Atera*'s hold.

Namol descended, took one look at Eckhart, and then turned to greet Chemorix Yacrorilia, the new Chosen representative.

Eckhart watched the two gang leaders embrace warmly. They knew each other well, and Eckhart knew them both. He'd trusted Namol for years before this campaign started, but the rebellion had consolidated that trust, so now Eckhart valued Namol even more.

Chemorix belonged to the Dhesith race. He towered over even Namol's burly frame. Eight muscular arms sprouted from his shoulders in a ring that encircled his back and chest. A matching row of eyes surrounded his head in a complete crown so he could see in all directions. His four legs rotated in a seamless flow of movement when he crossed the landing platform.

He must have rocketed to the top of the Chosen hierarchy. Vuldak Dhaddet had never been more than a mouthpiece for the Chosen. He was a businessman, a middleman. Chemorix really was an enforcer in the Chosen—or he used to be. He must have made his mark to become their official representative. Making his mark could have involved killing the right person, executing the right hit or job, or a combination of both…or maybe something a lot worse.

The two leaders turned and approached Eckhart together. They stayed shoulder to shoulder, but their arrival only eased Eckhart's agitation.

He wouldn't have the same conflicts between these men that he'd between Vuldak, Namol, and Rory Vagill. Namol and Chemorix were friends. They trusted each other, and they shared the same goals. They shared the same honor among thieves and assassins.

Namol stormed up to Eckhart and embraced him in front of everyone. "Thank the stars you're back. I worried something might happen to you on Earth."

Eckhart laughed in relief to see his friend again. "Don't worry. I wasn't planning on staying there." He turned to Chemorix and grasped his hand. "Thank you for coming. I'm thrilled that you're

taking over the Chosen."

Chemorix made a smacking sound in his mouth. "That worm Vuldak was a pustule on the backside of our clan for too long. He caused too many problems, and he deserved to die. The Chosen are grateful to you for leaving him to die. It should have happened years ago."

"I'm glad to hear you say so."

"So when do we go after the Regiment?" Namol demanded. "If we don't do it soon, the gangs will do it without us. They're becoming discontented that we haven't eliminated the Regiment already."

"It's critical that you stop your people from going after them. The Regiment has more of their experimental weapons. Anyone who goes near them will be destroyed, until we can figure out a way to defeat them."

"Excuse me, Eckhart," Dallas interrupted, "but we agreed…"

Now it was Eckhart's turn to hold up his hand. "Not now, pal. I'll decide when we go after the Regiment."

Namol and Chemorix turned to Dallas. "What are you keeping from us, Eckhart?"

"We'll discuss our plan once the Immortals leader gets here. We need all three gangs together with my fleet before we make another assault on the Regiment."

"Here he comes now," Dallas announced.

The whole party turned as another vessel approached the *Atera*. Eckhart didn't recognize it. It didn't match any vessel type he knew; it looked strangely like it had been cobbled together from parts of a bunch of different ships.

It landed and disgorged at least twenty aliens all from different species. They lined up just outside the hatch and came to attention.

Then a tall Urus descended the steps and turned to face Eckhart.

He froze when he recognized Innyria.

Eckhart would have gone to embrace Innyria, too, but something stopped him. Innyria looked different—very different.

His features no longer hovered between young and ancient. Innyria seemed to have turned to solid granite since he'd left the *Atera*. He almost looked like a completely different person.

He advanced toward the waiting party. Namol and Chemorix parted to let him through, but Innyria's reappearance did something to Eckhart. Maybe it was losing Alice and now getting Innyria back

in her place. Eckhart started forward and met Innyria in the center of the landing platform, where no one else stood around eavesdropping.

"You came back," Eckhart began.

"I'm the leader of the Immortals now."

"How did that happen?" Eckhart asked.

Innyria's gaze slid sideways toward the other leaders standing behind Eckhart. "In the usual way."

Eckhart winced. So it was true. Innyria must have killed a few people—or a lot of people.

He could only think of one place where Innyria could have gone to consolidate his rule over the Immortals. Innyria must have gone back to Parilia, but he hadn't returned to his old post at the security office. He'd only been gone a few weeks. He hadn't spent that time verifying the identities of new arrivals.

He must have worked fast to carve his way to the top…unless Innyria had been much more deeply embedded in the Immortals hierarchy before he left.

No, he couldn't have been. He'd worked for the Chosen at the same time, so he must have been neutral.

But he wasn't neutral now. "So Chemorix is taking over for the Chosen. That's good. He's solid."

"Why don't you come over and talk to them?"

"I want to talk to you first, Eckhart," Innyria replied. "The Immortals want to wage a campaign against the Regiment. They want to go after the Regiment now. If you don't do it, I won't be able to stop them."

"We *are* waging a campaign against the Regiment. That's exactly what I need to talk to you about, but it's important that your people don't go after the Regiment on their own."

"Why not?" Innyria demanded. "We want justice. We all do."

"The Regiment has more experimental weapons. They're the ones who wiped out Nals and Aerleth, along with their whole fleet. More people will die unless we find a way to defeat these experimental assets."

"What are the experimental assets?"

"We don't know yet." Eckhart waved him forward. "Come on. The others need to be involved in this discussion."

Eckhart led Innyria back over to the group, who stood muttering in front of the elevator. Namol and Chemorix turned to face Innyria.

“So it’s you,” Namol remarked. “I’m surprised, I won’t lie about that, but I’m pleased you’re here.”

“Thank you,” Innyria replied. “I’m surprised, too, but it was the best way to get the job done. The Immortals haven’t had decent leadership in a long time—not until Nals and Aerleth—and now they’re dead. The Immortals want vengeance.”

“We all do,” Eckhart interrupted. “Let’s go upstairs, and we can decide on a plan to—”

A low vibration went through the *Atera*. “What was that?” Rixby said.

“The ship’s sensors are picking up a disturbance in the space around your fleet, Eckhart,” Dallas told him. “It’s affecting the whole fleet…and the gang fleets, too.”

Another deeper, louder tremor rocked the ship. This one jolted the *Atera* harder to one side, and a few Velocities skidded on the landing platform.

Rixby squealed and toppled over sideways. She would have bowled across the platform if Bing didn’t catch her in time.

“The fleet is under attack!” Dallas called. “The *Kestera* and the *Eotera* are both taking hits!”

“Who’s attacking us?” Eckhart yelled over the noise.

“I’m not sure! The *Eotera* is taking damage to the Triorium drive.”

Eckhart wheeled back to the three gang leaders. “Get back to your fleets. I’ll contact you from the bridge and we’ll—”

A deafening crash struck the ship and pitched everyone ass over tea kettle. They tumbled into the wall and landed in a confused heap.

Eckhart pried himself out of the stack. “Get off the *Atera*! If whoever it is wants to target me, they might leave you alone.”

“There’s only one group that would attack you, Eckhart,” Innyria replied.

“That’s impossible!” Rixby said. “We’d know if anyone came near enough to attack us.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Eckhart pushed the three gang leaders away. “Go! Get back to your fleets. I’ll let you know if we’re going out to fight anyone.”

The three men rushed away. Eckhart turned to the others, but before he could tell them what to do, Dallas broke out of line. He stomped onto the platform on his way to the hatch, where Innyria

and Chemorix were already launching.

Eckhart thrust out his hand to stop Dallas, but it was already too late. Dallas activated his jet thrusters, took off, and zoomed out into space.

The elevator whisking open made Eckhart turn around. He got in with the others and they rode up to the bridge.

Rixby scrambled onto the podium at Eckhart's side. "What's the situation? Who's attacking us?"

"No one," she peeped. "There's no one there."

Another crushing slam answered her. An invisible wave caught the *Atera* and hurled it sideways into the *Kestera*. The two ships crashed into each other with an ear-splitting concussion. Then they ripped apart with a gut-wrenching tear of metal pulling away from metal.

More concussions and slams struck the rest of the ships collected in Eckhart's fleet. They tossed into each other, and parts ripped away from hulls all over the field.

"What the hell is going on?" Eckhart called. "There must be something there."

"Something's causing a disruption in the fabric of space. I can't pick up anything there, but something's definitely moving the ships around."

Eckhart stared down at the controls in front of him. He didn't see anything there but all the ships in his fleet hurtling this way and that. Some invisible hand flung them in all directions.

Dallas whizzed off the *Atera*'s landing platform in front of Eckhart's eyes. He zoomed in front of the *Atera*, but there was no one there to fight.

The mysterious force caught him in its grip and hurled him hard against the *Eotera*. His armor clanged into the hull, and he somersaulted away. He righted himself in space between the *Atera* and the *Kestera* and hovered there, looking around at the chaos unfolding.

"The Regiment is doing this," Eckhart murmured.

Rixby looked up. "They are? How? We're hundreds of parsecs away."

"I don't know how they're doing it, but it's the only explanation." He attacked the controls. "All ships—make tracks for the Regiment—full assault! Jackal Clan—Immortals—Chosen—now's your chance to assault the Regiment. Converge into one fleet

and make for the Keilara system—maximum speed."

"It's about time," Chemorix growled.

"Dallas…"

"I'm with you," Dallas replied through the ship's communications system. "I can fly on my own. I'll meet you there."

All three gang fleets launched at the same time. Eckhart seized the *Atera*'s helm and throttled the battlecruiser to full speed. The *Atera* took off with the rest of Eckhart's fleet, and in a second, the whole alien horde raced away in a blinding streak.

The alien horde plunged into the Keilara solar system. The Regiment line hadn't moved an inch. Everything looked dark and quiet over there.

"I sure hope you're right about this, man," Eckhart muttered.

"I am," Dallas replied through the communications system. "You remember your promise, Eckhart."

Rixby looked up. "What promise?"

"Nothing. All ships—attack!"

The four alien fleets closed on all sides. They surrounded the Regiment in a giant whirling, flickering cloud of weapons exploding and plasma venting into space.

"Work in from the outside," Dallas instructed. "I'll take the Stormbreakers."

Rixby looked up at Eckhart again, and he nodded. "Do it. Namol, bring your people in from the left. Chemorix, you take the right. Innyria…"

Eckhart broke off. Innyria was already coordinating the Immortals group to wheel behind the Regiment and come at the line from behind.

The Immortals parted into two streaming torrents of hundreds of ships. They split to target the Regiment line extended on both sides.

"Let's go!" Eckhart ordered. "*Eotera*—follow Dallas!"

Dallas tilted toward the Stormbreakers and fired his jet thrusters. A blaze of igniting Datrium flared from his feet. It burned much brighter and hotter than ever before, and he rocketed toward the Stormbreakers.

The alien horde closed on the line's outer edges, and hundreds of ships opened fire. They shot with lasers, plasma, and dozens of other weapons.

Nothing scratched the Regiment hulls until Dallas got within range of the Stormbreakers. The combined laser beams of all seven

battleships flashed into the night sky, joined, and nailed Dallas in all its epic power.

It caught him in midflight and stopped Dallas in his tracks. He struggled against it, but he couldn't move.

"Dallas!" Rixby squealed, but Eckhart was too busy to respond. The split wings of the alien army struck the Regiment's outermost ships, and their weapons hit home.

Banshees and a few Colossuses exploded in fire. The sight set the aliens off, and they attacked even more ferociously. They closed their net tighter, and all three gangs started gnawing their way through the line toward the center.

Rixby grabbed Eckhart's arm. "You have to help Dallas! You have to get him out of there! The Stormbreakers will destroy him."

Eckhart did his best to ignore her. He didn't want to look at Dallas, or he might forget his promise. He gunned the *Atera*'s engines, and the rest of his fleet laid into the Regiment from the front.

Rixby yanked harder at his elbow. "Eckhart! You have to save Dallas! You can't leave him out there to die!"

Her insistent tugs interfered with his steering. He jerked his arm out of her grasp and concentrated everything on targeting the Regiment.

The Immortals wings raced between the Banshees, decimating their numbers by the dozen. The Banshees tried to break out of line and return fire, but they obviously weren't expecting anyone to penetrate their protective field.

Crushing thumps boomed out of the Stormbreakers. The same space distortions rocked the battle, throwing every ship off course. Banshees crashed into their Colossus neighbors, but the aliens adjusted to the new conditions.

Innyria's two split wings circled back to the rear and joined up into a river of ships. They dove headlong into the Regiment position, veered dangerously close to the Stormbreakers and back outward, and caught the wave racing to the perimeter.

"Bring them to me!" Namol bellowed over the noise. "Bring the Banshees into our guns."

"Bringing them in!" Innyria replied. "Take them!"

The Immortals plunged for the Banshees, destroyed dozens, and sent the rest fleeing straight into the Jackal Clan's shots. Innyria's second wing did the same thing with the Chosen on the other side.

Exploding ships dotted the solar system on both ends of the Regiment line, but the Stormbreakers remained inviolate and untouchable.

Eckhart and the rest of his fleet concentrated their Triorium shots on the Colossuses. They huddled near the Stormbreakers, where that mysterious energy protected them.

It surrounded the Colossuses, but it couldn't save the Banshees. Dallas must have drained too much energy from the Stormbreakers' weapon.

Out of the mayhem, Dallas' voice cracked over the communications system. "Now, Eckhart! Do it now!"

Eckhart slammed the *Atera* to full throttle and plunged for the Stormbreakers. Colossuses all over the field turned their guns on the battlecruiser.

They hammered the Triorium field with devastating shots, but Eckhart didn't slow down. He smashed the throttle down, even with the ship already flying at full speed.

He streaked right up close to the central Stormbreaker and slammed the ship into reverse. He whipped the ship backward and unloaded every ounce of his Triorium on Dallas.

"*No!*" Rixby shrieked. She pounced on Eckhart's hands, trying to rip them away from the controls.

He gritted his teeth, crushing the firing mechanism with all his strength as the ejection spouted from the *Atera*'s guns.

The moment the Triorium hit Dallas, the energy field around him combined with the Triorium and ignited a cataclysmic explosion. It detonated all over the field and enveloped not just the alien fleet but the whole Regiment position, too.

The blast ripped Dallas out of the beam and hurled all the alien ships far away into the next system.

Eckhart cartwheeled away from the command podium. Rixby screamed and he tried to grab her, but the blow tore her out of his reach.

He heard Clifton, DeWalt, Squids, and the rest of the bridge staff yelling and screaming in the background. They all pitched against the walls and then slammed down on the floor.

Eckhart peeled himself off the floor and limped back to the podium. He scrambled to get his brain working while he scanned the Keilara system.

The Regiment remained in exactly the same place, as inviolate

as ever, but the alien attack had whittled their numbers down by at least half.

None of the Banshees remained. Forty Colossuses flanked the seven immovable Stormbreakers. Other than that, the Keilara system stood silent and still, as though none of these battles had ever taken place.

Eckhart searched the rest of the alien mob and let out a shaky sigh when he read all of them intact and accounted for. None of the gangs had suffered any losses. The explosion threw them all clear without damaging them.

Dallas hovered between the *Kestera* and the *Eotera*. He trained his optical lens toward the Regiment position, too, but he hadn't taken any damage, either. The *Atera*'s controls read all his life signs as normal.

Whatever Dallas had thought the blast would do to the Regiment, he must have vastly underestimated the mystery weapon's power.

It didn't feed back on the Stormbreakers. It didn't weaken them at all, which meant that whatever the weapon was, it was still on board those ships. Eckhart and his people would have to come up with some other way to defeat it.

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6

Eckhart stretched out on the bed in his quarters and looked through the window at the stars. He didn't return to the luxurious apartment on the *Atera*'s top deck where Aistenz used to live.

Instead, Eckhart had taken a cabin on the same deck with Clifton and DeWalt. It somehow seemed fitting that he should stay near the other Earthlings, even though most of them were gone now.

Staton, Short, and Nuñez had stayed home on Earth. Eckhart would have left Clifton and DeWalt there, too, but they'd insisted on coming back.

Dallas wasn't here, though. Eckhart didn't know where Dallas was spending his time these days, especially now that he didn't need to refuel on Datrium anymore.

Eckhart reminded himself to ask Bing if Dallas still needed nutrient, but he really didn't want to know. He didn't want to hear that Dallas had finally dispensed with this last trace of his humanity.

Eckhart stared up at the stars for a long time. This view left him one small square of sky where he didn't see the rest of the fleet—*his* fleet.

The Jackal Clan, the Chosen, and the Immortals armies joined forces with him in the Uugmek system. They were far enough away from the Regiment that they thought they would be safe, but that space distortion weapon left a question hanging over everyone's heads.

The Regiment had attacked the fleet from an incredible distance. If they did it once, they could do it whenever they wanted. They must have developed a weapon that could interfere with the fabric of space anywhere, no matter how far it was from the Regiment line.

Dallas had made himself scarce after the battle against the Regiment. Eckhart didn't know why, since Dallas didn't explain it to him. Eckhart could only assume that he was sulking because his master plan to throw his life away had failed.

Rixby wasn't talking to Eckhart, either, after he'd tried to kill

Dallas right in front of her.

That didn't leave many friends left. He could go down to the medical bay and talk to Bing, but not even that would make Eckhart feel better. Something else was bothering him, and it wasn't the fact that he'd tried to kill Dallas. He couldn't put his finger on it, but it nagged at him and wouldn't let him fall asleep.

He needed to find a way to defeat whatever new assets the Regiment was using against him and his fleet.

The Regiment wasn't targeting him specifically. They might know he was the one who'd organized these attacks. He was the one who'd started the rebellion, and he was the one who'd gotten the Regiment banned from Earth.

He was also the one who'd won the aliens the right to hunt the Regiment down and destroy what was left of it. Of course the Regiment would want to strike back at the man who did all that.

He tried one last time to pinpoint exactly what was bothering him, but thinking about defeating these assets didn't help.

They had to be people just like the men he'd left on Earth. They'd be Earthling soldiers who'd gone through the Regiment's secret labs. They had to be.

Eckhart just hadn't seen them yet. They stayed on the Stormbreakers and deployed their weapons remotely. That was their power.

He forced himself to shut his eyes, but the same question kept pestering him. How could he defeat them when he didn't even understand their power?

Calling Yausqith back into the war was out of the question. Eckhart didn't even have the nerve to ask Rixby how she'd convinced Yausqith to go back into his hole, or how she'd survived her encounter with him.

Eckhart didn't understand Yausqith, and didn't want to. He didn't want to know anything about how Yausqith worked. Eckhart was too grateful that Yausqith was gone.

He needed something…some alien with all Yausqith's power, but one that Eckhart and his friends could control much more easily. He needed an alien who wouldn't go rampaging off on his own, killing everything in his path. Who did Eckhart know of like that?

He felt himself falling asleep despite his best efforts to stay awake. He floated out into the stars and his mind traveled back to

the Keilara system, but now he was alone. He didn't have a ship. He soared through space like Dallas did.

He lingered near the edge of the solar system and studied the Regiment force for a while. It looked a lot smaller without all those Banshees hanging around, but that somehow made it look even more menacing.

All the Regiment's power concentrated at the center, where the Stormbreakers stood in formation. The Colossuses surrounded the Stormbreakers, but they didn't make the Stormbreakers look any stronger. Nothing could.

The Stormbreakers radiated power—dark power. It infected the space around them and surrounded them in a halo of deadly menace. Going near them meant death.

A split second later, Eckhart whisked on board one of them. The blink of an eye snapped him inside the ship, and he found himself in a lab. It looked familiar, even though he knew with that strange dream-knowing that he'd never been here before.

Beakers of clear liquid lined all the workstations. Earthling lab technicians worked over heating plates and distillation apparatus. They kept taking this and that from certain beakers, combining the solutions, and remixing them with substances from their distillation processes.

Eckhart migrated between them, trying to understand what he was seeing. This was a Regiment lab, so they must be working on their experiments, but he didn't see any people or aliens or anyone they might be experimenting on.

He didn't see anything until he reached the end of the row. Only then did he notice several large tanks built into the ship's hull.

Clear Ioscesten gave him a view of fully grown Earthling men suspended in the tanks. Wires and tubes hooked up to their faces and their limbs.

More technicians took substances from the workstations, measured them into apertures in the wall, and then entered data on their computers.

Eckhart stood back and marveled at the sight. This must be it. The Regiment was still carrying on their experiments out in space.

He looked around again. If he could find where the Regiment was keeping its assets, maybe Eckhart could see some clue on how to defeat them.

His dream awareness blocked him from realizing that he was

dreaming. He didn't even notice how strange it was that no one in the lab noticed him. He could walk among them without disturbing their work. He was a ghost.

He turned back when he noticed some technicians working on a different set of beakers. These containers looked the same as the others, except that one of them had something in it.

He drew closer and realized with a gut-wrenching lurch that the thing preserved in solution was a miniature Earthling fetus. It curled up in a ball, with its wrinkled little face crunched up in a pained grimace.

The lab techs kept pipetting fluid out of the beaker the same way they did the rest. They didn't treat the beaker any differently than the others.

The thing drew Eckhart nearer with the force of gravity. He couldn't look away from the misshapen face floating in clear liquid. This meant something. It meant something important, but he couldn't figure it out inside this dream.

He stopped next to the table and picked up the beaker. The fetus rotated in its solution bath so that it faced Eckhart…and then it opened its eyes.

It looked right at him, and he knew with absolute certainty that he was looking at his own face.

He screamed and let go of the beaker. It slammed down on the table, shattered into a million pieces, and Eckhart snapped awake in his bed on the *Atera*.

He gasped for air and rolled out of his blankets, feeling sick. Sweat streamed off his face and his t-shirt stuck to his back. He bent over the side of the bed and gagged. He wanted to puke, but nothing came out.

He sat up panting and choking. He couldn't get that picture out of his head. That thing in the bottle was him…but that wasn't possible. It was just a dream.

He doubled over and propped his elbows on his knees. He shivered with cold now that his blankets no longer kept him warm. He started shaking, but he couldn't move.

He and his people had suspected for a long time that the Regiment had fled to the Keilara system so they could continue their experiments. Nuñez and the other assets must have gotten deeper into Eckhart's head than he realized. He must be having nightmares about them going through the lab experiments. He

couldn't think of any other explanation for that dream.

He had to find a way to defeat them. He had to find a way to destroy the Regiment once and for all.

No one on the fringes could live in peace until the Regiment was gone for good. The Regiment was probably cooking up a way to wipe out the fringe population even now.

Eckhart was on the Regiment hit list now, too, even if he wasn't part of the fringes. The Regiment would be cooking up a way to kill him more than anyone.

That must be what the nightmare meant. He was the Regiment's Enemy #1…but he already knew that, so why was he having nightmares about it now?

He finally summoned the energy to stand up. He crossed the cabin, dumped his soaked clothes in the laundry chute, and stepped into the ionic shower.

He got dressed and rode up to the bridge. He expected to have it to himself at this hour, but he got a surprise when he found Dallas standing on the command podium. "Are you taking over, pal? I appreciate it. Now I can really retire."

Dallas chuckled and went back to studying something on the controls. "Very funny, Eckhart. I'm afraid none of the fringe aliens will ever let you retire. Besides, you're taking over the gangs. The three leaders all answer to you…and you know what that means. You'll have to defend your authority against challengers."

"Don't remind me." Eckhart frowned at the instruments Dallas was working on. "What are you doing?"

"I'm going over the readings from the battle. I'm trying to figure out why my plan didn't work. I want to know which frequencies I can use next time so it does work."

"Did you ask Rixby about it? She can probably recite that information off the top of her head."

"She isn't talking to me after I explained that it was my idea for you to fire on me."

Eckhart sighed. "That makes two of us. I don't think she'll ever forgive me."

"She will. She blames me now."

Eckhart didn't answer. Rixby would never let him forget that he tried to kill Dallas.

He moved to the next display and started doing some research of his own. Dallas leaned over to see what Eckhart was doing. "What

are you looking at?"

"I'm doing some research on the Vrali."

"What about them? They're so warlike no one dares to venture into their territory. None of the gangs will have anything to do with the Vrali. Their whole culture is based on blood challenges and fighting for authority."

"I'm not concerned with the Vrali. I mean, I'm concerned about them, but it's the Ihi I'm interested in."

"What's that?" Dallas asked. "I don't know that word."

"The Ihi? They're aliens."

"I never heard of them."

"Most people haven't. The Vrali use them to harvest Destrine."

"I never heard of that, either." Dallas cocked his head to one side. "There's no record of it in my cerebral database. Are you sure you aren't making this up, Eckhart?"

"I'm not making it up. You don't have the Ihi in your cerebral database, either, but they definitely exist. Look."

He moved over and let Dallas look at the records he was studying. The planet Gruna in the Nuvauvis system listed a population of seven million Ihi. That on its own wouldn't raise any flags, except that the Vrali population of the same planet was less than five hundred thousand.

"That's weird," Dallas remarked. "So what's this Destrine?"

"It's filaments of plasma similar to Datrium, except that Destrine is more solid, whereas Datrium is more gaseous. Destrine is more stable and it has more applications."

"Why does everyone use Datrium, then?"

"Because Datrium is more available. Destrine only comes from one source—the Ihi. Another substance called Athite acts like the Ihi's blood, but it's just pure plasma. The Athite collects metabolic wastes from their bodies, and it condenses into a more solid form. The Ihi excrete it as Destrine. That's why the Vrali keep the Ihi—to get their Destrine. Destrine is the Vrali's principal energy source."

"What do you mean by 'keeping' them?"

Eckhart grimaced and turned away. "They hold the Ihi in suspended animation so the Ihi keep producing Destrine without being able to get away. The Vrali keep huge banks of Ihi that churn out Destrine every hour of every day. Destrine powers all of Vrali society. The Vrali even use it in their weapons."

"So if you take the Destrine, you can defeat the Vrali. Is that it?"

“Not exactly.”

“Why are you looking at this?” Dallas asked. “What good does it do us?”

“I’m not sure why I’m looking at it, except that the Ihi are the only aliens I can think of who are powerful enough to defeat the Regiment’s new assets.”

“But to get to the Ihi, you’d have to get through the Vrali,” Dallas pointed out. “Only a madman would even think about that, much less try it.”

“I know.”

“You aren’t thinking about it, are you, Eckhart?”

Eckhart grinned at his friend. “You guys are always telling me I’m crazy. I might as well prove it, right?”

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7

Eckhart strolled down the line of his friends and examined them one after the other. Dallas. Bing. Rixby. Squids. Namol. Innyria. Chemorix.

Eckhart halted in front of the three gang leaders. “You three take your people back into your own territories. The Regiment is less likely to go after you there.”

“Tell me you aren’t giving up on defeating them,” Innyria countered. “Tell me you’re coming back to fight them.”

“I’m doing this so we can fight them and defeat them. We can’t defeat them without some way to beat their new weapons. Your gangs will be safer in your own territory until I come back. When I do, we’ll finish this for good. You have my word on that.”

Namol extended his hand. “All our hopes are riding on you, Eckhart. Call on us if you need us for anything.”

“I will.” Eckhart shook his hand and then hugged Innyria.

“I don’t like leaving when I only just got here,” Innyria told him. “I came to fight, and I don’t want to leave.”

“I feel the same way. Don’t worry. There’ll be plenty of fighting to do very soon.”

“There better be.”

Innyria squeezed Eckhart’s shoulder, and then all three leaders went to their ships. They disembarked from the *Atera* and left Eckhart alone with his core survivors.

“Rixby…”

“Don’t worry,” she peeped. “I’ll handle things here.”

“Take the fleet as far away from Vrali space as you can.”

“Don’t worry. I have no plans to stick around.”

“How will we know if you’re all right?” Squids asked.

“I’m sure the Vrali will tell you if I’m not,” Eckhart said.

“How do you plan to find the Ihi without the Vrali finding out?” Rixby asked.

“I’m not sure yet.”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Bing asked. “He’s going to knock on their front door and ask them to see the Ihi.”

“That won’t work,” Dallas remarked.

“Can we not discuss my strategy before I even try it?” Eckhart demanded.

“Why shouldn’t we discuss it?” Dallas asked. “If it’s doomed to fail, shouldn’t we come up with a different strategy?”

“No, we shouldn’t. We’re doing it. No one is asking you to come.”

“You asked me to come down here and go with you,” Dallas replied.

“Me, too,” Bing added.

“Well, stop asking questions. We’re going.”

“*Why* are we going?” Bing asked.

“Because I said so!” Eckhart snapped.

His four friends regarded him, but for once in their lives, they didn’t argue back. He waited, but no one said anything.

“Well?” he demanded. “Aren’t you going to tell me how stupid this mission is and how it’s doomed to failure?”

“No,” Dallas replied.

“You said so, so it looks like we’re going,” Bing replied.

“Except for Squids and me,” Rixby replied. “We’re going to pretend you’ve just gone out for a temporary break from running the fringes.”

Eckhart pursed his lips. “Do you have to be so accommodating all of a sudden?”

“Yes,” Dallas replied.

Eckhart turned away. “Well, if we’re going, we should go.”

He crossed to the *Marathon* and went to the bridge. He pretended not to notice Bing sitting down in Alice’s old place at the navigation station. The *Marathon* didn’t feel the same without Rixby and Alice here, but Eckhart had come too far to back out now.

Dallas went down to the galley where he belonged. Eckhart ignited the engines, and a second later, the ship drifted off the *Atera*’s landing platform into open space.

The combined alien fleet hovered together, well clear of Vrali space. None of them wanted to risk getting close enough to spark the Vrali’s retribution. That should give the gang fleets time to withdraw to a safe distance before the shit went down.

Eckhart should have listened to his friends. He knew this mission was dangerous, but even after consulting Rixby, no one could think of any fringe aliens powerful enough to defeat the Regiment’s new weapons.

That left the Ihi, and for them, someone had to deal with the Vrali. Everyone else in the galaxy was watching to see Eckhart solve the world's problems, so he supposed he had to solve this one, too.

He honestly didn't care anymore about the danger. Something had flipped in his mind. Maybe actually making the decision to fire on Dallas had done it. Eckhart couldn't pinpoint exactly when it had happened, but he had somehow migrated beyond the point where sacrificing someone didn't mean as much as getting rid of the Regiment completely.

Maybe Dallas had made his point about that. One person didn't matter, no matter who it was. Losing friends—losing Eckhart's own life—none of that mattered anymore. Only the course in front of him mattered.

Not even the course mattered. Only the destination mattered. The obstacles and impossibilities standing between him and his destination dwindled until they vanished completely.

He checked to make sure all four fleets left the area before he approached Vrali space. Another fleet of giant destroyers patrolled the boundary.

They hailed the *Marathon*, and a gruff, gravelly voice barked through the communications system, but no visual came through. "State your business in Vrali space."

"I want to meet with…" Eckhart checked the records he got from Rixby. "I want to meet with Phrolain. My name is Eckhart. I'm in command of the alien fleet trying to destroy what's left of the Regiment in the Keilara system. I want to meet with Phrolain to secure his cooperation in our campaign."

"Liar!" Bing muttered under his breath.

Eckhart had to laugh. "I do want his cooperation. I want his cooperation to release the Ihi."

"He'll never agree."

"I know he won't, but that *is* the reason I'm here."

Bing chuckled and shot Eckhart a grin. "So what's your plan? Get in front of him and then kill him?"

"I wasn't planning on that, not right away."

Bing practically fell out of his chair laughing, but a second later, the Vrali patrol hailed the *Marathon* again. "We will take your ship into custody. We will transport you to Gruna."

"That isn't what we discussed," Eckhart countered. "I'll fly to Gruna on my own. No one is taking me into custody."

“We will take you into custody,” the same voice snarled. “That is the only condition under which you will enter our space. If you cross the boundary, we will open fire.”

Bing sighed. “Looks like you have a decision to make.”

“I’m not off to a very good start, am I?” Eckhart reopened the channel. “All right. You can take us into custody.”

One of the patrol vessels slipped out of line. The destroyers were all far bigger than the *Atera*. They were even bigger than the Stormbreakers. This was one of the smaller ones.

It pivoted backward, and some kind of field started to draw the *Marathon* into the rear hold. Bing studied it on the tactical grid. “What are they doing?”

“This must be some of their Destrine-based technology that no one else knows about. Why do you think the Vrali are so feared?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe it’s their tendency to kill anyone who doesn’t belong to their society. How do you plan to get the ship out of their hold once it’s time to leave?”

“First, we have to convince Phrolain to let us leave.”

Bing snorted. “That’s your job, not ours.”

The ship thumped down on the hold floor. “Stay inside your vessel,” the gruff voice ordered. “Do not attempt to disembark, or we will open fire.”

“That’s their favorite phrase,” Bing grumbled. “Do they honestly think we want to disembark here and see the sights?”

Eckhart tried to scan the patrol ship, but nothing came up. “The Destrine blocks all our scans. They really do good work with their technology.”

“What are you going to do when Phrolain refuses to let you use the Ihi…or even see them?” Bing asked.

“Could you stop asking questions? You’re making me nervous.”

“You don’t look nervous,” Bing remarked. “You look like you’re taking a walk in the park, considering you’re about to meet with one of the most notorious mass murderers in the galaxy.”

Eckhart didn’t answer that one, either. He was surprising even himself by how calm he was. This was by far the most dangerous mission he had ever undertaken, but he didn’t feel the slightest misgiving about meeting Phrolain or asking him for a favor that Eckhart already knew Phrolain would refuse.

Reckless daring started pumping through his veins. He actually felt insanely confident about this project—not because he thought it

would work, because it wouldn't. He just didn't give a flat shit anymore about anything except getting what he wanted.

Maybe he was turning into the leader Aistenz used to be. Maybe all the disasters Eckhart had suffered up until now really were the consequence of him being too soft and getting along with everyone.

None of that would get him anywhere here, but he no longer even had any desire to get along or watch out for anyone. He just wanted to reach his destination, and to hell with anyone or anything that got in his way.

He fiddled with his controls for a while, but the Destrine in the patrol vessel blocked him from seeing anything outside it. He eventually gave up and went down to the galley to see Dallas. Bing showed up a second later.

Dallas stood by his old nutrient aperture. He was studying something on his arm prosthetic. "Do you still need nutrient?" Eckhart asked.

"I haven't taken any on board since Bing and I discovered that the quantatid was taking over my operating system. I've been waiting for the alert telling me to take on more nutrient, but it still hasn't come."

"So how are your organic parts functioning?"

Dallas cocked his head to one side. "I'm not sure. I'm not even sure I have any organic parts left."

Just then, the same gruff voice came over the communications system. "You may disembark. Our patrol will take you to Phrolain."

"Good." Eckhart started unbuckling his sidearms. "I hate waiting."

"Aren't you going to take any weapons?" Bing asked.

"No, and neither are you. Phrolain would execute us on the spot if we went to visit him armed. We probably wouldn't even get off the patrol ship."

"What about me?" Dallas asked. "I can't disarm."

"Just keep your weapons hidden."

"Go on and finish that sentence," Bing told him. "Tell us how you're going to play it by ear and see what happens."

"You said it, not me."

Eckhart strode out of the galley. Dallas and Bing followed him to the cargo hold, and they walked out.

A bunch of armed Vrali surrounded them and held them at gunpoint the instant they made their appearance. Eckhart raised his

arms. “We’re unarmed. We only want to talk to Phrolain. We come in peace.”

“No one comes to Vrali space in peace,” the biggest Vrali snarled. It was the same voice that had spoken to him on the bridge. The patrol formed a ring around the four visitors and leveled their guns at their heads. “You may proceed.”

Eckhart started walking. He didn’t have to wonder where to go. The patrol maintained their positions, flanking the group on all sides.

Their weapons didn’t resemble anything Eckhart had ever seen before. Even the patrol ship’s interior looked strange.

The Vrali weren’t the biggest aliens on the fringes, even though they dwarfed Eckhart. Pincers surrounded their faces, with their fanged mouths taking up most of the space beneath their eyes. Three sets of jointed, muscular arms came out of elongated, segmented bodies. Their powerful legs carried them with surprising ease, considering their size and bulk.

Each set of arms held a different gun so each Vrali could target a different member of the group. The Vrali’s small eyes darted back and forth so fast they didn’t seem to look at anything for very long, but that was another illusion. Their lightning reflexes made them one of the deadliest species on the fringes.

Luckily for everyone else, the Vrali kept to themselves as long as no unfortunate alien strayed inside their territory. The Vrali retaliated against trespassers and traitors with unnatural ferocity. They resisted belonging to any other criminal group, and they recognized no authority but their own.

The other gangs steered clear of the Vrali, and Aistenz had done the same. He never even attempted to negotiate with them, much less tried to exercise his authority over them. He wouldn’t dare.

The patrol ship’s hold opened by some curious device Eckhart didn’t understand. The hull curled back like the skin of a living animal to reveal a vast hall rising high in the air.

Vrali filled the whole structure. They all seemed to be going somewhere, but none of them was going the same place as anyone else. Eckhart couldn’t figure out what they were doing, but the patrol never let him and his friends close to the rank and file Vrali anyway.

The party headed off into the crowd. The locals kept well out of the patrol’s path. None of them even looked sideways at the new

arrivals.

The patrol marched Eckhart and his friends to the very far end of the hall. The Vrali even covered the walls with countless chambers, rooms, apartments, or whatever they were up there. The hall resembled a vast city, but Eckhart didn't see any commerce: no trade, no goods being exchanged—nothing.

He didn't have time to wonder how their society worked. If he ever got the hell out of here, he might be one of the few people on the fringes who ever saw Vrali society and lived to tell the tale. He wouldn't be able to tell anyone about what he saw, though. He didn't understand it himself.

The patrol approached the farthest back wall, and the atmosphere definitely changed here. The surrounding Vrali didn't crisscross each other's path as much. They all headed in the same direction Eckhart was going.

The patrol halted in the middle of a massive crowd gathered by the back wall. All the Vrali were taller than Eckhart, so he couldn't see beyond them to whatever they were gathering to see. This must be Phrolain.

The visitors had to stand and wait for a long time. One person at a time inched forward until Eckhart realized they were forming a queue to file in front of Phrolain's throne.

The Vrali leader sat on a giant seat carved into the wall itself. Numerous Vrali stood guard over him, each one holding multiple weapons. Steps rose from the floor so Phrolain sat above his underlings.

The common Vrali filed in front of him and addressed him in their own language. It sounded to Eckhart like a bunch of scratchy hisses. Phrolain answered each one in the same husky undertone, and the guards surrounding him carried out whatever decision he handed down

They dragged some Vrali away. Others received gifts from Phrolain, but quite a few got executed right there at the foot of his throne.

This didn't deter the Vrali from going near him. Phrolain's guards wrestled some unfortunate creature to the floor and blasted his head off with their many weapons, but the rest of the crowd only surged forward in their haste to take the victim's place.

Eckhart caught Bing glancing at him. If Eckhart failed, he and Bing would probably meet the same fate. Eckhart didn't know what

Dallas planned to do in that case, but he thought he had a pretty good idea.

Dallas might be able to survive a full-scale Vrali assault, but an Earthling and a Yakit wouldn't get off so easily.

Eckhart's pulse quickened as he neared the front of the crowd. His brain stubbornly resisted coming up with any strategy for dealing with Phrolain once their turn came.

The patrol broke through the frontmost line of Vrali. Now nothing stopped Phrolain from seeing the visitors—or captives, as it were.

He reacted instantly and froze to his seat. His hard eyes didn't waver from the group except to flick from Eckhart to Bing, and finally to Dallas.

Phrolain raised one arm and motioned the group forward. He said something in his own language and the patrol prodded Eckhart in the ribs.

Eckhart advanced, with the patrol still holding the group at gunpoint. The guards never lowered their weapons once. He positioned himself right in front of Phrolain.

"You are Eckhart," Phrolain began in a gravelly voice.

"Yes, I am. I'm the one waging war against the Regiment—or what's left of it. I've come to ask for your help to stop these people from destroying the fringes."

"They will never destroy the Vrali. Earthlings are too weak."

Murmurs went through the crowd, and Eckhart became aware of everyone behind him listening to their conversation.

"The Regiment has been plotting for years to wipe out all the aliens on the fringes," Eckhart went on. "They've developed powerful weapons that can annihilate your whole population without you ever laying eyes on an Earthling. That's what they're doing over in the Keilara system right now."

"What the Regiment does is your business, not ours," Phrolain boomed. "You are the one who began this war against them."

"I only started the war to stop them from killing billions of innocent aliens."

"And the aliens have killed billions of innocent Earthlings. This is what I think of your war against the Regiment."

He waved his arm to one side. Eckhart saw movement in his peripheral vision. He braced himself for someone to attack him from that direction, but when he looked that way, he spotted one of

the rear patrol guards rushing into the group.

Before anyone could blink, the guard aimed some kind of device at Dallas' neck. The thing buzzed, and Dallas slumped. His chin fell on his chest and all his limbs went slack except for his legs, still holding him upright.

Eckhart spun around, but it was too late. "You brought a weapon of war into our stronghold," Phrolain rumbled. "You deserve to die for your treachery, but since you are the leader of this misguided campaign, I will keep you alive to make sure your fleet does not come back for you. If they try to rescue you, you will die along with your friends."

He waved again, and the crowd parted to Eckhart's right. His blood ran cold when more Vrali dragged Namol, Innyria, and Chemorix into view. All three gang leaders were bleeding and covered in bruises.

The guards threw the three gang leaders down on the floor at Eckhart's feet. He had half a second to make eye contact with Innyria before the patrol closed in. Eckhart ducked to avoid a gun coming down on his head, and then a devastating crack struck him from behind.

He buckled and hit the floor, out cold.

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8

Bing bent over Innyria, pulled open his mouth, and spat a dose of Eplite onto Innyria's tongue. "I'm sorry, Eckhart. I'll be with you as soon as I can."

Eckhart pulled the cloth away from his face, grimaced at the blood soaking it, and pressed it back into place. "Take your time, pal. Take care of them first. I can wait."

Bing went back to examining Innyria. He patted down Innyria's arms and located a bad break in one of his legs. "You didn't really think this would work, did you?"

"I wasn't expecting Phrolain to let me just waltz out with the Ihi, if that's what you mean." Eckhart surveyed the area around him with his one good eye. "Still, we're in here and we're still alive. That means we still have a chance to succeed."

"Succeed in getting ourselves killed, you mean."

"Will you shut up with that?" Eckhart snapped. "You didn't have to come. If you're just going to nag me all the time, keep your mouth shut."

As soon as he said it, he regretted it. He'd never talked to anyone on the *Marathon* crew like that before and he didn't want to start now, but Bing only laughed. "Okay, buddy. I'll try to keep the attitude to a minimum, but someone has to give you grief now that it's just the two of us."

Eckhart winced again and withdrew his attention from the surroundings. He didn't need to look to see just how hopeless the situation was. He'd been looking at it for hours while Bing worked on Chemorix and Namol. Eckhart had practically memorized every detail of his position.

The patrol that had brought him into Phrolain's hall had dumped him, Bing, and the three gang leaders in one of the hundreds of adjacent rooms. They didn't even bother to stand guard. They didn't have to, with so many Vrali around.

There must have been thousands of them in this hall, and each one was as dangerous and xenophobic as the next. Any one of them would sooner kill the prisoners than look at them.

The simple fact that Eckhart and his friends belonged to

different species made them the Vrali's enemies. Eckhart being an Earthling couldn't possibly make the situation worse.

Eckhart didn't need to wonder where Dallas was, either. Phrolain had had his guards move Dallas' inert frame up to the platform on which Phrolain's throne stood. Dallas' shiny armored frame stood right next to Phrolain's elbow just to drive the point home, in case Eckhart didn't understand it already.

Phrolain had deactivated Dallas. Eckhart didn't want to find out whether Dallas would ever turn back on again. These Vrali had done to Dallas what all the Regiment's experimental weapons couldn't.

Eckhart barely glanced out into the hall when the patrol of Vrali guards passed the entrance to the room where the prisoners sat. The guards looked in on them and then left.

This one patrol had been coming by every now and then, but Eckhart couldn't detect any pattern to their appearance. It appeared to be completely random, and strangest of all, the other Vrali paid no attention these guards. No one treated them any differently than the rank-and-file Vrali.

Eckhart couldn't make head or tail of Vrali society. It resembled no other culture he had ever encountered on the fringes, but then again, he hadn't been here that long.

The guards only paused for a second to make sure the prisoners were still there, and then they left. They might not come back for hours, or they might not come back at all.

They treated their guarding duties so casually, Eckhart could almost believe they weren't really guarding the prisoners at all, but only looking in out of curiosity.

Bing left Innyria alone and went over to Namol. The Jackal Clan leader hadn't moved since the guards brought him in.

Eckhart shut his one good eye so he wouldn't see Bing working on Namol. Eplite could only do so much, and Bing had no medical equipment here.

Now what was Eckhart supposed to do? He tried to examine the hall for any clue about where the Vrali were keeping the Ihi, but he only saw more and more Vrali.

Rixby's records said the Vrali kept the Ihi in tall rows of animation stations. The Vrali kept so many Ihi that they needed whole cities of these stations to house them all, but the Ihi weren't here.

There must be five thousand Vrali in this one hall. That meant the rest of their population must be somewhere else.

Eckhart couldn't even see any technology in here that would need Destrine to function. The light came through slots in the ceiling. Was it daylight? He kicked himself for not learning more about the Vrali before he came here, but it was too late now.

Bing woke him from his thoughts by touching Eckhart's arm. "I'm ready to work on you now. Open your mouth."

Eckhart pulled the cloth away from his face and opened his mouth. Bing gave him one dose of Eplite and started studying the side of his face.

It felt like it had swollen to three times its normal size, and his head pounded, but the Eplite started making him feel better right away. Bing prodded Eckhart's temple and Eckhart winced, but a second later, Bing spat Eplite on that, too. He spread it over Eckhart's wounds, and the pain started to subside.

"How does that feel?" Bing asked.

"Much better. Thank you. How are the others?"

"They'll be okay. It might take some time for them to recover."

Eckhart's gaze migrated to Innyria. He didn't look like he was going to be okay, but he trusted Bing to tell the truth about that.

Bing sat back and met Eckhart's eyes. "Seriously. What do you want to do?"

"I'm taking ideas from the peanut gallery. Any suggestions?"

Bing glanced out at the hall and the Vrali passing in all directions. "Do you think they ever sleep?"

"Rixby's records say the Vrali go into a hibernation state every three days, but I'm guessing they don't do it all at once. I don't see this hall ever emptying entirely, do you?"

"I don't think. That's your job." Bing sat back on his heels, spat a mouthful of Eplite into his own hand, and started spreading it on one of his many limbs.

Eckhart looked away again. He didn't want to watch Bing treat himself. Bing had dealt with Eckhart's injuries even before his own. He should never have brought Bing with him…or Dallas, for that matter.

Bing finished what he was doing and scooted over to Eckhart's side. "You should lie down and get some sleep. I'll keep an eye on things. I'm sure you'll wake up if anything happens."

Eckhart didn't move for a second. He wanted to be the one to

keep watch over the others, but he knew Bing was right.

He stretched out on the floor, but as soon as he closed his eyes, he knew what was going to happen. Exhaustion and pain took over. His brain got fuzzy. He tried to stop it, but part of him wanted to see it again.

He let go of his hold on consciousness and drifted away. He floated out of the hall, and before he soared off into space, he looked back down at Gruna.

The hall he'd just left occupied a giant building connected to an even bigger hangar, full of ships as big as the patrols that had captured the *Marathon*.

Four more huge halls dotted the landscape in a line heading toward the horizon. Banks and banks of towering structures surrounded all those halls. These bank cities covered more of the planet's surface than the halls themselves, in thousands and thousands of racks of Ihi animation stations.

A few Vrali patrolled the banks, but nowhere near enough to stop someone from getting to the Ihi. All Eckhart had to do was get out of the hall and figure out how to free them.

A force stronger than time hauled him out of the Nuvauvis system. It turned him around and whisked in at lightning speed back to Keilara.

The Regiment fleet remained exactly where he'd left it, and this time, he didn't linger on the outer orbits to look at it. He flew straight into the biggest Stormbreaker and reappeared in exactly the same lab. He came to a stop right in front of the beaker with the fetus in it.

He didn't recoil from it. He stared down at it—at himself. What did this mean? It had to mean something—something much bigger than simply feeling for the men who went through the Regiment's experiments.

The lab was totally deserted of technicians this time. The distillation apparatus still bubbled and things still simmered on burners, but he was the only person here.

No, that was wrong. He turned around and looked at the men suspended in their tanks. He felt absolutely no surprise at all when he saw himself floating in the first tank…and the second tank…and the third.

He walked down the whole wall. He was the man in each tank. What did it mean?

Something drew him to the door through which he'd entered the lab last time. He snuck closer and, in his dream, he floated through the door.

Scaffolds surrounded a vast hold in the Stormbreaker's very center. Rooms, labs, chambers, and even ship platforms occupied every tier, but he didn't see any Earthlings moving around. Each of these Stormbreakers housed thousands of Earthlings who'd fled Earth when the Intergalactic High Court outlawed the Regiment, so where were they all?

The hold wasn't empty, though. Seven men rocketed through the huge space left vacant in the center.

The experimental assets fired strange energy weapons at each other, tossed each other back and forth from a distance, and flew around without touching anything. They moved like the original five assets, but without the glorious halos that usually blinded anyone looking at them.

These assets tumbled and swooped around the hold in wild flight patterns. They soared close to where Eckhart stood, and he saw that each of them was a carbon copy of himself.

Someone shook him awake. "Eckhart!" Bing hissed. "Eckhart, wake up!"

Eckhart panted for air and looked around, trying to remember where the hell he was.

"Easy, man," Bing told him. "You had a nightmare."

Eckhart collapsed back on the floor. Sweat saturated his clothes, and his heart pounded. He felt sick.

"You okay?" Bing asked. "That must have been a bad one."

Eckhart struggled to sit up, and Bing pulled him over to the wall. Eckhart slumped against it, fighting to breathe. He shut his eyes and all the pictures from the Stormbreaker flooded his mind.

He didn't want to think about it, but even as the images started to fade from his mind, he scrambled to hold onto them. He floundered to find some answer to this mystery. Why did he dream about the Stormbreaker a second time?

"Do you want to talk about it?" Bing murmured in his ear.

Eckhart wiped his hand across his drenched forehead. "I…I was on the Stormbreaker. Something's going on over there."

Bing laughed. "I think we all know what's going on over there."

"No. I mean, there's something going on over there that has to do with me. I don't understand it."

“How do you mean? How can it have anything to do with you?”

“I’m not sure. In the dream, I’m in the lab where they’re coming up with these assets and weapons. But I’m the one they’re experimenting on.”

Bing relaxed back against the wall. “That makes sense, doesn’t it? You hold yourself responsible for stopping them. This must be your way of thinking about it.”

“No. It isn’t that. I can’t explain it, but it has something to do with me personally. It has to.”

Bing studied him closer. “How can you be certain of that?”

“I’m not, actually, but this is the second time I’ve dreamt about it. It has to be about me. I was…” Eckhart broke off. He couldn’t tell Bing about being the fetus in the bottle or the men in the tanks, or being the assets practicing their new powers. He didn’t want to think about it, but he couldn’t stop himself from doing just that.

Bing waited for Eckhart to say something else, and when he didn’t, he changed the subject. “Too bad you didn’t dream up a way for us to get out of here.”

“I did. The Ihi are right outside.”

“Outside…” Bing squinted up at the towering hall. “Outside *this*? That doesn’t help us get out of here.”

“There aren’t many Vrali outside in the stacks, and this hall opens into the patrol ship hangar. Don’t you remember? All we have to do is make it back to the door that let us into here.”

“We don’t even know how to work the doors,” Bing pointed out. “They might be organic, or they might only work for Vrali. They might be pre-programmed not to let anyone of any other species in or out. That would be just the kind of thing these people would do.”

“You stay here with these three. Take care of them. I’ll go.”

Eckhart started to stand up when the patrol passed again. Bing yanked him down hard, but the patrol passed by on the main floor. They didn’t come near the room, and they didn’t look in.

Eckhart crouched close to Bing until the guards passed out of sight. They vanished into the throng and didn’t reappear. Did they care at all if the prisoners stayed where they belonged?

“You are *not* going out there, Eckhart,” Bing whispered. “You already lost Dallas. You aren’t throwing yourself away, too.”

“Don’t you get it?” Eckhart hissed. “The Ihi are our only chance to destroy the Regiment forever. The longer the Regiment ships keep hanging around out there, the stronger they get. They’re still

experimenting, and we've already seen the kind of shit they come up with. Every weapon they create is more powerful than the last. We can't wait around for them to create something we won't be able to defeat at all."

"The guards are bound to spot you, and then it will be all over."

Eckhart pried his arm out of Bing's iron grip. "I have to go. Don't worry. I'll be careful."

Bing didn't move when Eckhart climbed to his feet. "What am I supposed to do if you don't come back?"

"I'll come back." Now it was Eckhart's turn to squeeze Bing's arm. "Don't worry about me. Everything's going to be okay."

"You really believe that, don't you?"

Eckhart laughed under his breath. He didn't know why, but something in that second dream had cleared his head. The cloud hanging over him had evaporated and left him more confident. He hadn't felt this good in a long time. "Yes. I'm certain of it."

Bing only gazed back at him, and Eckhart stood up. The rest of the world dissolved. Only his objective remained. None of the seemingly impossible barriers between him and his desire seemed real anymore.

He knew exactly what he had to do. Like something out of a dream or a fantasy, he saw it all coming true the minute he stepped out of the room.

He emerged in the great hall and paused to look around. He didn't see the guard patrol anywhere. They stood out from the rest because they were the only ones carrying weapons, but they weren't here anymore.

All the regular Vrali continued to criss-cross the floor doing whatever, but before Eckhart could move, they all stopped at some unspoken signal. They left whatever they were doing and started streaming to Eckhart's left, heading toward Phrolain's throne.

Eckhart didn't give himself another second to hesitate. He'd never find a better time to get out of the hall. He skimmed down the wall on a direct line back toward the entrance to the hangar.

None of the Vrali tried to stop him.

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9

Eckhart came to the hall entrance, but it didn't open for him the way it opened for the patrol guards. He checked over his shoulder to make sure none of the Vrali were watching, and then he touched the entrance door. It felt organic, the way Bing said. Some kind of spongy tissue squished under his fingers.

He prodded it, but still nothing happened. The Vrali were all packing more tightly around Phrolain's throne. Eckhart couldn't expect this to last very long.

He sidestepped back along the wall to decide what to do when, a second later, the entrance opened by itself. It peeled aside and a bunch of Vrali came in from outside. These weren't armed guards, either. They passed Eckhart without looking at him, and they all joined the crowd heading for Phrolain's throne.

Eckhart sprang forward and dove through the entrance as it closed behind them. He rolled into a crouch in the hangar. The patrol ship sat right in front of him. Now he had to find a way to get outside, but he didn't see any exit.

If Bing was right, even finding an exit wouldn't help him. He had to come up with some other way to get out of here.

His pulse raced, and his chest tightened from the tension. He inched over to the nearest patrol ship. It appeared to be powered down, but a second later, a deafening roar startled him out of his mind.

He dove into the shadows to hide as another giant living hole opened in the roof itself. A different patrol ship descended through the opening. It extended landing gear to set down on the floor, and a split second later, yet another patrol ship fired its engines just a few dozen yards from Eckhart's hiding place.

He made a split-second decision and bolted for the nearer ship. He clambered onto its wing as it lifted off the floor. The first ship drifted down as the second one rose into the night sky. The roof remained open while the second ship launched out of the hangar.

The wind whipped Eckhart's clothes and hair. He could hardly force himself to breathe. Was he about to launch into space?

He glanced over the wing. The roof opening curled closed the

way all Vrali doors did. Could Eckhart dare to hope this one might be organic, too?

The patrol ship punched its throttle and rocketed upward. Eckhart couldn't stay here. He dove headfirst off the wing and plummeted toward the roof. He curled into a ball, turned his back to the roof, and prayed to high heaven he was right.

He landed on the spongy roof, bounced, and then landed a second time. It sprang and flexed underneath him. It propelled him up so he could roll and crawl to the side of the building.

The fleshy substance made up the whole roof. He didn't find anything solid until he reached the outer wall. The ground was only about twenty feet below.

He jumped, tucked, and rolled into another crouch. He held his breath, looking everywhere for more Vrali coming to capture him, but no one came. He was outside.

The vast fields of Ihi spread all around him. Faint blue light shone from their animation stations. The light showed Eckhart the few Vrali monitoring the Ihi. It also created enough shadow for Eckhart to conceal himself.

He sneaked closer and flattened himself against the hall he'd just escaped. He waited while a few more Vrali passed him. Now he could approach the Ihi banks without anyone seeing him.

His heart twisted when he discovered the Ihi floating in some kind of solution. Wires and tubes attached to their faces and limbs exactly the way they attached to the men in the Regiment lab.

Eckhart's head spun with a sudden wave of déjà vu. He could be the one trapped in these tanks. He *was* the one trapped in these tanks. He had to get these people out of here if it was the last thing he ever did.

Was this what the dream meant? Were the dreams leading him to this?

The Ihi resembled the Urus, Innyria's species. Their bodies had much shorter arms and legs. They had only one set of arms, instead of three.

Their heads and bodies were the main things that set them apart. The skin on their arms and legs appeared waxy and opaque, but the skin on their heads and torsos was translucent. It gave a view through their bodies to a gentle blue light shining from inside them.

Eckhart thought at first that the light came from the stations to

give the Vrali workers enough light to see what they were doing. Now he realized it came from the Ihi themselves.

That light flowed and pulsated in their heads and bodies. It throbbed with a steady, circulating rhythm like blood, but it didn't follow any visible vessels. It swirled and undulated beneath the Ihi's skin. Eckhart didn't see any organs in there, either.

Some of the tubes leaving the Ihi's bodies pumped the blue substance into pipes lining their stations. It must be carrying Destrine away from all these Ihi for the Vrali to use.

The very first Ihi he came to locked its gaze on Eckhart. The eyes appeared black in a field of that soft blue, but the energy behind the eyes radiated out and pierced Eckhart's heart. This Ihi was looking straight at him, and it recognized him. It had to.

This was the dream. Eckhart relived the moment when the fetus looked at him. It knew him, and this Ihi knew him. It was still conscious and aware in its tank. Did it have any idea that he was here to free it?

The question was *how* to free it. Eckhart didn't see any mechanism attached to the tank. Of course there wasn't. The Vrali never intended to release these Ihi—ever. The Vrali's whole society depended on the Ihi.

The creature's eyes communicated so much sadness and longing that Eckhart could hardly stand it. Did he only imagine it? Did he project his own feelings onto this creature? Did it even know he was here at all?

Eckhart patted down the framing around the Ioscesten, and the Ihi's gaze followed him. Was it getting excited that someone was trying to free it?

He placed his hands on the surface. He ached to say something to the creature inside, to promise it that he would succeed, but he couldn't talk to it through the tank.

He attacked the framing again. The Destrine tube fed into a metal pipe. Eckhart seized it and yanked. It started to give. He strained every muscle and twisted until it loosened enough.

He wedged his leg right against the tank. The Ihi inside thrashed in its solution. It definitely knew what he was doing now.

He ripped and jerked at the pipe, getting more determined and enraged by the minute. He heaved one last iota of muscle power and ripped the pipe out of its socket. It broke loose, and glowing blue Destrine spilled on the ground at his feet.

He staggered away, panting hard. The damp pipe went cold and slimy in his grip, but he was too far out of his mind to care about anything else.

He stumbled backward and raised the pipe over his head. The Ihi in the tank fixed him with a wild look. Eckhart charged the tank to smash in the glass when a crushing jolt of lightning split his world apart.

Even then, his own momentum kept him rushing toward the glass. He had to break it at all costs.

The instant before he brought the pipe down, another vicious crack destroyed his body and mind. He slammed down on the ground, and one pulse after another hit him all over his body.

Vrali surrounded him. He struggled to pry his head up, not to see them but to look at the Ihi still floating in its bubble of safety. More Vrali surrounded it, trying to refit the pipe back into place.

The Vrali seized Eckhart by the arms and dragged him away, but Eckhart still stretched his head backward to see that Ihi.

Eckhart had come so close to freeing it from its watery prison. He had to see it again. He had to tell it that he wouldn't give up until he succeeded, but he couldn't even see it anymore.

The Vrali hauled him back to the hall, through the excited crowd, and back to Phrolain's throne. More guards marched Bing over, but at least they'd left the three gang leaders where they were. Innyria, Namol, and Chemorix were probably too injured to move.

The guards forced Eckhart and Bing down on their knees in front of Phrolain.

"You Earthlings are so stupid," he fumed. "I knew if I let you move around that you would show me your true objective."

Eckhart stared at him. "You planned this?"

"So this was your plan all along," Phrolain boomed. "I knew it. You want to sabotage our Ihi banks. You wanted to destroy our society by robbing us of our power supply."

"No!" Eckhart blurted out in a rush. "I want the Ihi to help me defeat the Regiment. The Regiment is developing weapons that—"

"You are a liar! I don't believe you. You would say anything to save your own neck. Now tell me the truth. You came here to destroy our society. Who hired you? Who are you working for?"

"No one! I told you. I only care about defeating the Regiment. I want to use the Ihi's plasma against the Regiment's experimental weapons. We've tried everything else. We can't break their power,

and they're killing everyone who goes near them."

"You are making up stories to trick me!" Phrolain boomed. "You would say anything to manipulate the Vrali. You are just as corrupt as all the other aliens on the fringes."

"I'm not lying. Ask any of my friends and they'll tell you the same thing."

"They will only lie for you. You came to our space in Aisentz Trotaer's ships. You must be working for him."

"I'm not working for Aisentz Trotaer! Aisentz Trotaer is dead!"

"Now I know you are a liar and a fraud!" Phrolain roared. "You are working for him. He hired you to come here and destroy our power supply, and for that, you deserve to die."

Phrolain waved to his guards. Eckhart saw the Vrali moving in with their weapons. "You are sentenced to execution."

"No!" Eckhart struggled to get to his feet. He couldn't let this happen. "You have to believe me. "I was the one who got the Regiment outlawed! I was the one who got them banished from their homeworld."

"Then you are responsible for the death of all the people who try to attack them. You will die. Your accomplices will be executed and any of your people who cross our boundary will be destroyed."

The guards holding Eckhart yanked him to his feet, against his best efforts to fight them off. They were just too strong for him.

He struggled so hard he yanked himself off his feet. They still held him in an unbreakable grip, so he wound up toppling to the floor. They followed him down and pinned him, while three more pivoted in and leveled their weapons at his face.

Bing winced and turned his head away so he didn't see the guards coming closer. Eckhart's heart threatened to explode out of his chest as four Vrali surrounded him.

The guards' weapons hummed to life as they powered up to fire. They'd blow his brains out any second now. Eckhart scrambled to come up with some way to explain himself so Phrolain would listen to reason.

In his last desperate moment, Eckhart turned his head toward Phrolain. He had no idea what he would say, because the truth didn't move Phrolain at all.

Phrolain didn't care about saving the fringes or destroying the Regiment. He didn't know or care about anything the *Marathon* crew did, or what they'd gone through since this whole terrible

business started.

The instant Eckhart turned his head, he spotted Dallas standing by Phrolain's throne. Phrolain had done this to Dallas. Dallas would stand here for all eternity, a trophy of Phrolain's triumph, if Eckhart didn't do something real quick.

Eckhart reacted on pure adrenaline. He seized the first gun that pointed in his face, hurled himself onto his side, and slammed his body into the Vrali holding the weapon.

The others all opened fire, but Eckhart was already moving out of their way. He curled and rolled between the first Vrali's legs.

He towed the gun barrel with him. As soon as he got behind the guard's back, Eckhart gave the weapon a tremendous yank and tore it from the Vrali's grip.

The four guards whipped around and leveled their guns at him. Eckhart skidded around them toward the crowd, and the guards rotated to keep him in sight. All the assembled Vrali screamed and ducked to avoid the guards' weapons.

Eckhart took advantage of their cover, dropped onto his knees, and jammed the gun into his shoulder. He fired without giving himself a chance to aim and blasted one guard's head off.

More guards moved in from all over. Each carried three guns. Eckhart couldn't count all the Vrali closing to recapture him.

Bing darted out of nowhere and pounced on a guard from behind. He strapped one of his many limbs around the Vrali's neck. The creature spun around trying to fight him off, and Bing snatched a weapon from that guard, too.

Bing sprang clear and fired into the creature's chest. The guard hit the floor and Bing charged to Eckhart's side.

The two friends opened fire, but not fast enough. The Vrali formed ranks and leveled all their weapons at Eckhart and Bing. The crowd exploded in panic, and they all stampeded away to get out of the line of fire.

The whole hall descended in chaos, with people rushing everywhere and the guards unloading at the two escaped prisoners. Eckhart's brain completely shut down and he let his instincts take over.

He darted behind random Vrali civilians to protect him from the guards. The guards advanced into the mayhem and laid down a carpet of fire. They didn't seem to care if they hit one of their own people.

Eckhart saw his chance and lunged for the guards. He sprayed gunfire in all directions and won himself a split second's reprieve. He got behind them and charged to Phrolain's throne.

Phrolain roared in fury and shot out of his seat, but Eckhart was too fast. Eckhart aimed his weapon at Phrolain's head. Phrolain tried to round on him, but Eckhart slammed him down hard in his chair.

The guards spun around to come after Eckhart again, and Eckhart sidestepped to position himself behind Phrolain. The guards advanced, but they didn't shoot with Phrolain in the way.

"Kill him!" Phrolain bellowed. "Kill him now!"

The guards raised their weapons and gunfire detonated somewhere in the hall, but it didn't hit Eckhart. It came from his right, and pulp and gore splattered everywhere as four guards crashed to the floor.

Eckhart, Bing, and all the other guards whirled in that direction. More shots blasted out of the crowd. The noise spiked to an ear-splitting din as Innyria and Namol stormed out of the chaos.

They flattened six more guards and kept on coming. Phrolain roared again and tried to launch out of his seat. Adrenaline and desperate fury clouded Eckhart's brain. He rotated around Phrolain's chair and jammed his gun barrel straight into Phrolain's face.

"Call the challenge!" Eckhart thundered. "Call the challenge now or I'll blow your brains out right here!"

"You are insane!" Phrolain boomed back.

Eckhart exploded in maniacal laughter. "You got that right, pal, and one of us is gonna die right now! Call the challenge, or you can die a coward's death in front of all your people."

Phrolain stiffened for a second and then threw back his head. His enormous mouth gaped wide open, and he let out a deafening roar that shook the whole hall.

Dead silence fell over everyone. The Vrali stopped screaming and running around. All the guards lowered their weapons, and everyone turned to stare at Phrolain.

Innyria, Namol, and Bing kept their weapons up, but the guards completely ignored them. They turned their attention on Phrolain, who let out another roar at least as loud, but it sounded a thousand times louder in the silence.

He lowered his head and locked eyes with Eckhart. "Put your

weapon down, Eckhart. The challenge is accepted."

Eckhart put his weapon down. He didn't realize until he straightened up and tried to breathe that he was shaking all over.

Now he'd really done it. He challenged Phrolain to a battle to the death. It would be a miracle if Eckhart survived, but it was the only way to stop the guards from slaughtering Bing and the three gang leaders.

He staggered down the steps to where Bing stood. "You're crazy!" Bing whispered. "You can't beat him."

Eckhart drew in a shaky breath and turned his back on Bing. He faced Phrolain, who finally got to his feet. He towered over Eckhart and all the other Vrali assembling to watch the challenge.

"Release my friends," Eckhart demanded. "Let them take my ship back to our own space. Let them leave before the challenge begins."

"No!" Bing broke in. "You'll need me when this is over with."

"Just go," Eckhart told him. "Take the *Marathon* and get the other three back to the fleet. The rebellion needs them a lot more than it needs me."

Bing stared into his eyes, but Bing and Eckhart barely saw each other anymore. Eckhart had traveled somewhere else, where none of this was real anymore.

"You're wrong, Eckhart," Bing murmured. "The rebellion needs you more than it needs any of us."

Eckhart only smiled at him, but his attention remained riveted on Phrolain.

This alien stood between him and his destination. This alien might be bigger and stronger and more ferocious. Phrolain must have a lot of fighting experience, but he couldn't overcome Eckhart's destiny.

"Get out of here, Bing," Eckhart murmured. "Take Chemorix back to the *Atera* and make sure he survives. We need a Chosen leader who's faithful to the cause."

"Eckhart…" Bing began again, but Eckhart blocked his friend's words out of his mind. Those words and all the feeling between Eckhart and his friend only separated him from his destination.

Eckhart held Phrolain's gaze while Bing went over to Innyria and Namol. Eckhart heard them whispering.

Phrolain didn't give his permission for them to leave, but he didn't stop them, either. He glared down at Eckhart. Neither of

them looked away.

In that moment, Eckhart knew he would win. He didn't know how, but his destiny made it inevitable.

Eckhart only had to glance sideways toward Dallas to get all the certainty he needed. He had to defeat this alien. Failure wasn't an option. Dallas was depending on him. Rixby and Squids and Bing were all depending on him.

All the aliens who suffered under the Regiment's heel were depending on him. His path lay through the Vrali, through the Ihi, and ended…

It ended in that lab on the Stormbreaker. Whatever else happened, Eckhart would end up there someday. He didn't know why or how, but he knew now that it would happen. No force in creation could stop it.

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10

Whispers and rustling noises drifted through the hall behind Eckhart. He looked away from Phrolain just long enough to see Bing leading Namol and Innyria away. They would take Chemorix back to the *Marathon* with them.

A hissing noise told Eckhart that the organic entrance had opened and closed. Now nothing existed for Eckhart except for Phrolain.

Phrolain walked down the steps, and all the guards pulled back to clear a space in front of the throne. This was it. Eckhart had asked for the challenge. Now he had to face it.

He stripped off his jacket, and then his shirt. He threw them on the floor and kicked off his boots and socks. The stone floor chilled his feet, and then that sensation evaporated, too.

Phrolain started circling to his right, and Eckhart did the same thing. He eyed the giant alien and tried to locate some vulnerability he could exploit.

He would definitely have to avoid the pincers around Phrolain's mouth and the fangs inside it. Phrolain would try to use them and his strength against Eckhart, who was much smaller. He had three sets of arms to Eckhart's one, and Eckhart wouldn't be able to overcome Phrolain's power. Phrolain had all the advantage of speed and agility, too.

Phrolain opened his mouth and grimaced at Eckhart to show all his teeth. His pincers snapped and his eyes glittered with evil triumph.

He looked so fearsome that Eckhart should have trembled for his life, but instead, Eckhart's spirits soared. He had it. He knew how he could defeat Phrolain now.

Phrolain had all the strength, skill, and ability that Eckhart didn't. Eckhart was nothing but a weak Earthling. Phrolain would count on that. That was Phrolain's weakness. He was too confident in his own victory.

Phrolain must have fought his way to the top by defeating other Vrali. He must have defeated the most powerful Vrali in their society. He had no experience fighting anyone as small and weak as

Eckhart.

Eckhart made a split-second decision, and just in time. Phrolain circled and, without warning, rocketed toward Eckhart so fast Eckhart didn't even have a chance to brace himself.

Phrolain slammed one massive hand to Eckhart's throat and smashed him backward onto the steps. The onlookers exploded in cheers, but no one came near.

The next second, Eckhart stared up at Phrolain's hideous face glaring down right on top of him. What was Eckhart just thinking about using Phrolain's confidence against him? He couldn't even remember anymore.

Eckhart grappled at Phrolain's hand, trying to pry Phrolain's grip off his windpipe, but Eckhart couldn't budge him. Phrolain's other five arms pounded Eckhart all over while the alien held him down.

Lack of air drove Eckhart into a panic. He struggled to get off the ground. He even glanced over at Dallas in some pathetic hope that Dallas might be able to help him, but Dallas remained as still as ever.

Eckhart flailed and slapped at Phrolain's arm, trying to get some air into his lungs. Phrolain laughed a deep, booming laugh and then dove for Eckhart's face. Phrolain cracked his jaws and all his pincers stretched to snap at Eckhart.

Time slowed down and stopped as Eckhart watched Phrolain lunge in to bite his face. Eckhart whipped up his arm and shoved his hand between his own face and Phrolain's. He wasn't thinking anything other than stopping those teeth from reaching him.

His middle finger stabbed into something squishy. Phrolain let out a vicious roar, and Eckhart realized in a daze that he had accidentally stabbed Phrolain in the eye.

Phrolain reared back, but he didn't release Eckhart's throat. That instant of space gave Eckhart all the courage he needed. He could do this.

His head cleared, and he exploited Phrolain's only other weakness. Phrolain had only two legs, just like Eckhart himself.

Eckhart hooked his leg around Phrolain's and kicked out. He tore one of Phrolain's feet off the floor, and Phrolain's weight jolted sideways.

Eckhart's confidence soared. Phrolain wasn't as unbeatable as he seemed. Eckhart followed up his advantage, pulled his leg away

from Phrolain's, and hunched over. He curled in a ball and tucked between Phrolain's legs.

He was right about Phrolain. He wasn't used to fighting anything smaller, weaker, and less skilled than a fully grown Vrali. Phrolain bellowed in fury as Eckhart's maneuver broke his hold on his neck.

Eckhart rolled onto the floor between Phrolain's legs. Phrolain spun around and tried to grab him, but Eckhart slipped into some kind of madness he'd never experienced before.

Maybe all these people telling him he was crazy had finally snapped his brain. He released a wild, primal rage simmering beneath the surface, but in the end, it was really nothing more than the anchor lines pulling him toward his destiny.

He vaulted to his feet right there between Phrolain's legs. Eckhart slammed his shoulders hard at the point of Phrolain's pelvis and knocked Phrolain off his feet.

Phrolain toppled against the steps where Eckhart had just been lying. He shot up with impossible speed, but Eckhart didn't try to stop him.

Eckhart caught Phrolain as he came, and pivoted sideways. He shoved Phrolain face-down on the floor and jumped on top of him.

Phrolain tried to fight Eckhart off, and in that moment, Eckhart realized something else about the Vrali that he could exploit to his advantage. Their arms only jointed forward.

Phrolain couldn't reach behind his own back. As long as Eckhart held him down on the floor, Phrolain could move his arms up and down and forward, but not backward.

Eckhart reacted with a ferocity he never would have dreamed of using before. He grabbed the topmost arm on Phrolain's right side, hooked his elbow around the shoulder joint, jerked the arm back, and the joint snapped.

Phrolain let out a ground-shaking roar, but Eckhart was all done playing nice. That crunch of breaking bone and the pop of disconnecting ligaments thrilled his blood. He wanted to tear this creature limb from limb. He wanted to do it for Dallas. He wanted to do it for the Ihi, but mostly he wanted to do it for his own bloodthirsty lust for victory.

He tore Phrolain's arm all the way back and the joint separated. Muscle tore, and when Eckhart released the arm, it flopped to the floor, useless.

That one success switched a circuit in Eckhart's brain, and he lost all sense of himself. He grabbed the topmost arm on the left side and tore it back even more brutally. The noise of cheering Vrali drowned out everything else.

Eckhart got clear and scooted as far away from Phrolain as he could get. Phrolain sprang to his feet, snarling and spitting in rage. His features quivered with fury, and he kept bellowing at Eckhart, but one of his sets of arms hung limp and lifeless from his destroyed shoulders.

Eckhart's heart soared at the sight of his enemy injured and fuming. Phrolain bared his fangs again, but Eckhart didn't give him a chance to attack a second time.

Eckhart charged him, but Phrolain was too fast. He raised his other four arms to grab Eckhart, who pulled the same trick. He rushed into Phrolain's grasp and let his legs buckle under him.

He skidded straight into Phrolain's shins, strapped his arms around Phrolain's leg, and yanked Phrolain off his feet. Phrolain slammed down next to Eckhart, but he saw the move coming and jerked himself onto his back.

Phrolain hardly touched the ground before he shot off the floor. Eckhart didn't have time to get out of the way before Phrolain hit him, so he darted in the only direction left to him.

He dove underneath Phrolain, taking Phrolain's leg with him. Phrolain slammed face-down again, and Eckhart sprang on top of the Vrali leader one more time.

Eckhart straddled Phrolain's back, grasped Phrolain's leg with all his might, and ripped it back as hard as he could.

The crack echoed through the hall, and all the cheering stopped. Eckhart climbed off Phrolain's back much more slowly. He walked deliberately to a spot well removed from the Vrali's fallen body.

Eckhart turned around to face his enemy. Dead silence enveloped the hall, except for Phrolain grunting under his breath and Eckhart's own ragged breaths.

Eckhart's chest and shoulders heaved as he tried to get enough air. Sweat soaked him, and a kind of buzzing rang in his ears. It sounded a lot louder than the Vrali's cheering.

Phrolain dragged himself to the steps in front of his throne. He used them to haul himself up, and he balanced on his one good leg. The other dangled by a few scraps of flesh. Blood poured from the wound where Eckhart had torn it from its socket.

Phrolain leveled Eckhart with a ferocious glare. He bared his teeth and snapped his pincers as menacingly as ever, but Eckhart didn't attack. He didn't have to. He'd won, and everyone knew it.

Phrolain straightened up, but something in his eyes told Eckhart that Phrolain knew the truth, too. Eckhart started to relax, but he couldn't leave this alien alive. Vrali society didn't work that way.

He glanced around. The guards still surrounded the area, holding all their weapons. Eckhart shuddered in relief that Bing and the others weren't here to see this.

Eckhart strolled over to one of the guards, but the creature didn't look at him. It kept gazing at Phrolain.

Phrolain turned his head to follow Eckhart with his eyes, but didn't turn his body. He couldn't. He had to balance on one leg. One attack from Eckhart would finish him, but Eckhart didn't attack.

He took the gun out of the guard's hands, and the guard handed it over without resisting. Eckhart returned to the place where he could face Phrolain, and he shouldered the weapon.

Phrolain didn't move. He didn't acknowledge Eckhart's victory. He didn't have to. The guard giving Eckhart a weapon was enough.

Eckhart leveled the gun and fired into Phrolain's head. His skull exploded, and Phrolain's broken body hit the floor. His dislocated limbs flapped, and then slapped down for the last time.

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11

Eckhart lowered his weapon and looked around at the rapt crowd of Vrali all staring at him. The guards stepped forward, but none of them threatened him. They just looked at him like they were waiting for him to do something.

He became painfully aware of the gun in his hand. He didn't have any further use for it. He handed it to the Vrali who'd given it to him.

Eckhart crossed the floor, and all the assembled onlookers pulled back from him. They kept a healthy distance between him and themselves.

He picked up his shirt and put it back on, followed by his jacket. Everyone present stared at him while he put on his socks and laced up his boots.

His hands shook. Would he ever be able to calm down from this? Would he ever go back to being as civilized as he'd been just a few minutes ago?

Someone came forward, took hold of Phrolain's wrist, and dragged the body out of sight. Not even that seemed real.

Eckhart went back over to the guards. "Which one of you deactivated my friend?"

"Do you mean the robot?" one of them asked. It was the same voice that had addressed him on the *Marathon*.

"Yes, the robot. Can you turn him back on?"

"Yes, sir. I can do that now."

"Do it, then…and bring me the Ihi I tried to free a little while ago."

The guards all spun around to stare at him. "We can't, sir," the same guard replied. "Taking them out of their tanks will kill them."

Eckhart waved toward Dallas. "Turn him back on and then we'll talk."

The Vrali that had been talking to Eckhart waved to one of his comrades. The man moved out of line, and Eckhart recognized the same guard who'd deactivated Dallas in the first place.

The guy pointed his device at Dallas' neck, and Dallas' head shot up. A whizzing noise came from inside his helmet, and he tilted his

head from one side to the other, taking in the scene.

"Are you okay, pal?" Eckhart asked.

Dallas jerked his helmet from left to right. "Re-initializing… Yes, Eckhart. I'm fine. Something happened. I'm in a different position from a few seconds ago."

"Don't worry about it. The Vrali shut you down for a while."

Dallas turned around to study him. "Your adrenal response is elevated, Eckhart…and all your vital signs are outside the normal range."

Eckhart gave a weak laugh. "Yeah. I guess they are."

"Is something wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. I need you to come with me."

"Of course, Eckhart. That's what I'm here for."

Eckhart laughed again and squeezed Dallas' shoulder. "It's really good to have you back."

"I never went anywhere, Eckhart."

Eckhart only laughed. He went back to the guard and held out his hand. "Give me that thing."

The guard handed it over. Eckhart dropped it on the floor and smashed it under his heel. A gasp went through the assembly, but Eckhart ignored it. "Who's responsible for taking care of the Ihi's needs?"

"The scientists handle that."

"Who are they?"

"They stay in the Ihi banks," the same guard told him. "They have their own quarters where they can be near the Ihi. They aren't permitted in the halls."

Eckhart snorted. "I'll bet they aren't."

"Sir?" the guard asked.

"Never mind." Eckhart nodded toward the giant entrance at the back. "Do you have to reprogram that thing to let me in and out?"

"It programs itself. It allows Vrali in good standing to pass through whenever they wish."

"Except for the scientists, right?" Eckhart waved to the guards standing around. There must have been fifteen of them by now. "Follow me."

He went outside with Dallas at his side and all the guards behind him. The assembled Vrali parted to let him through. They all stared at him in stunned shock. None of them made a sound.

The whole scene revolved in some foggy haze out of Eckhart's

distant dreams…or fantasies, whichever it was. Was this really happening?

Defeating Phrolain didn't seem to touch him. He didn't remember himself doing any of those things. They seemed to happen to someone else, and now he was on his way to the Ihi banks with the guards helping him instead of attacking him.

He wasn't really in charge of the Vrali now. That didn't seem possible. It all fit into a surreal reality apart from himself.

He halted in front of the same Ihi. Eckhart would recognize the creature anywhere. The Ihi's face remained seared into Eckhart's mind for all time. He felt like he knew this creature better than his own friends.

A few Vrali were still working to fix the pipe that Eckhart had broken. "Get him out of the tank," he ordered.

"We can't," one of the scientists replied. "He'll die if we do that."

"Take him out anyway. I want to free all these Ihi, and if he dies, I'll know the others can't survive outside their tanks, either."

The scientists hesitated, but when the guards obviously didn't contradict Eckhart's order, the scientists got to work. They drained the Destrine tube and started dismantling the frame around the Ioscesten. It took a long time.

"What are you doing, Eckhart?" Dallas asked. "If the Ihi can't survive on their own, releasing them won't help the rebellion."

"We'll see about that." Eckhart kept gazing at the creature in the tank. Every passing minute made him more and more certain that this was the right thing to do.

A gurgling sound came from inside the metal frame, and the solution started to drain around the Ihi. The creature twisted in the sinking fluid and looked all around him in what looked like terror.

"Get those tubes out of his mouth," Eckhart ordered. "Disconnect him now."

The scientists scrambled to do what he said, but they couldn't get inside the tank without climbing up on top of the frame. The Ihi started to struggle and slapped the glass trying to save himself.

"Stand back!" Eckhart snapped, and grabbed one of the guards' weapons.

He wound back and slammed the butt hard into the glass, but nothing happened. It was too strong.

"Do something, Dallas!" Eckhart exclaimed. "Break that glass

without harming the Ihi."

Dallas stepped forward and punched the glass with his armored fist. The glass shattered and rained shards on the damp ground under the tank frame. The Ihi went into another panicked frenzy.

"Disconnect him!" Eckhart roared. "Get him out of there now!"

The scientists panicked, too. They attacked the Ihi and finally, after way too long, they pulled the tubes out of his mouth.

The Ihi slumped, and they lifted him down to the ground. He barely came up to Eckhart's chin, and his skin didn't glow the way it had in the tank. He gasped and spluttered, trying to breathe. He couldn't support himself, and the scientists had to hold him up.

"Do you know me?" Eckhart asked. "Do you recognize me?"

The Ihi struggled to pick his head up, but the look in his glassy black eyes made Eckhart shiver. He already knew the answer.

"I recognize you. You're the one who tried to break the tank last night."

"Are you…okay?" Eckhart asked. "Can you breathe all right now that you're out of that solution?"

The Ihi nodded weakly. "I'm all right. We can survive in this atmosphere. I'm just weak from being suspended in that solution for so long."

Eckhart rounded on the scientists. "Who told you the Ihi wouldn't survive outside their tanks?"

"Well…everyone. Our society has always kept the Ihi alive. They'd die out without the banks keeping them alive."

"Someone lied to you." Eckhart turned back to the Ihi in front of him. "I want to free your people. Are you sure removing you from these banks won't damage you at all?"

The Ihi choked on the next words. "We've been prisoners for generations. We gave up on ever being free."

Eckhart turned back to the scientists. "Free them—all of them."

"What about…?" one of the guards interrupted. "What about our power supply?"

Eckhart measured the guards standing around him. They all held weapons. If they decided to gang up on him, he wouldn't be able to stop them all before they killed him.

Then he remembered. Dallas was with him now.

He pointed at the scientists. "Get to work, and when you finish, bring all the Ihi into the hall over there." He turned back to the guards. "Come with me."

He went back inside. The fifteen guards seemed to be taking the lead in everything. The rest of the Vrali assembled behind these fifteen. Eckhart would have to win them over before he did anything else.

He climbed up on Phrolain's throne, but he didn't sit down. Dallas took the same position next to the seat, except that now he was fully operational. He could step in front of Eckhart at a moment's notice and mow all these Vrali down in seconds.

Eckhart faced the crowd and raised his voice. "Here's what's going to happen. I'm going to take as many of your ships as I need to transport the Ihi off the planet. Anyone who wants to come with me to help fight the Regiment is welcome to come. I'm sure the rest of the fringe aliens would be happy to have you."

The guards and a bunch of his audience exchanged glances.

"As soon as I'm gone," Eckhart went on, "you can have another challenge for your leadership. I won't intervene, and you never have to see me again."

"What about our power supply?" the same guard asked.

"You've been keeping the Ihi against their will all this time. Those tanks were never for the Ihi's benefit. That was a lie someone told you, and you've found it convenient to believe it all these years."

No one answered him. An uncomfortable murmur went through the crowd.

"If any of the Ihi want to come back and give you their Destrine, I won't stop them. If they don't, you'll just have to find another way to power your society."

"But we'll all die without Destrine," the guard countered. "You'd be serving us a death sentence."

"I doubt that. Maybe you'll think about joining the rest of the fringe population and trading with other races. No one else on the fringes has any trouble powering their ships and weapons and technology with Datrium."

Another murmur rose from the back of the crowd. The Vrali parted as several hundred Ihi stumbled into the hall. They all dripped from the tank solution. They stared back at their former captors in as much amazement as the Vrali stared at them.

The first Ihi that Eckhart had freed led the way toward the throne. Eckhart still couldn't think of it as his own throne. He didn't want to sit on any throne ever.

The first Ihi approached him and burst into a broad smile. “Your name is Eckhart, isn’t it? You are the leader of the fringe rebellion.”

“How do you know about that?”

“We know many things. I saw when you were standing outside my tank.”

Eckhart couldn’t stop gaping at this creature. “You saw all that? Did you send me that dream?”

The Ihi cocked his head and frowned. “What dream?”

“Never mind. I want to take your people off the planet. How do you feel about that?”

“We’re ready to go. We’re ready to fight the Regiment for you.”

“What do you know about the Regiment?”

“We know everything you know. I saw it all in your memories, and now the rest of our people know, too.”

“How?”

The Ihi shook his head. “We simply know.”

Eckhart swallowed the rest of his questions—except one. “I’m sorry, I don’t know your name.”

“It’s Ingai.”

Eckhart had to grin back at him. Something about this creature made him indescribably happy. He almost felt like he was being reunited with a long-lost family member, like he’d known Ingai for years—maybe even for his whole life.

The guard that had been doing most of the talking approached the throne, but he didn’t rise to Eckhart’s level. “If you follow me, sir, I’ll show you some ships you can use to transport the Ihi.”

Eckhart climbed down to where the man stood. He lowered his voice to a confidential murmur. “You should take over here. You’ll make a good leader.”

The guard straightened up. He stood at least ten inches taller than Eckhart and still carried all three weapons. “I’ll come with you, sir. We all will.”

“You don’t have to. This isn’t your fight.”

“It’s our fight now because it’s your fight. You’re our leader. You lead the Vrali to war and we’ll follow. Besides, you’ll need people to fly the ships.”

Eckhart’s heart flooded. He hadn’t expected this. He wasn’t thinking about anything up until a few minutes ago but getting out of here with his life.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“I’m Thagmor.” The man ran through the names of his fellow guards. They all lined up in front of Eckhart and saluted him as Thagmor introduced them. “We are all with you, sir. Your battle is our battle now.”

Eckhart swallowed hard. He’d asked for this, and now he had it. He was leader of the Vrali, one of the most warlike and determined races of warriors anywhere on the fringes.

He cleared his throat with difficulty. “All right. Let’s get this done. We need a bunch of those scientists to come on board with us to help the Ihi. Ingai, we’ll need to know what the Ihi eat, what they need as far as places to sleep—whatever they need.”

“I will assign my people to deal with the scientists,” Ingai replied.

“The scientists will all obey you,” Thagmor told Eckhart. “You have nothing to fear for their loyalty. They will serve their leader as true Vrali.”

“Thank you,” Eckhart choked.

“I will organize the Vrali force to deploy with you,” Thagmor went on. “We can rally at least three hundred ships. That will leave another three hundred to maintain security on the planet.”

Eckhart stopped himself from thanking Thagmor a second time. This was his by right. The force of three hundred ships was his to command as leader of the Vrali people.

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12

Eckhart woke up trembling and groaned. He rolled out of bed, dripping with sweat, but his legs were shaking so badly that he collapsed on the floor.

He huddled there, clamping his eyes shut against the visions that kept bombarding his mind. These nightmares just wouldn't stop. If anything, they got worse with every night that passed. He was really starting to dread shutting his eyes.

This one was the worst yet. He went through the whole sequence the same way as the last two times. He soared inside the Stormbreaker and landed in the lab.

He found the beaker with the fetus in it, but he had learned by now not to pick it up or even touch it. As long as he left it alone, it would keep its eyes closed.

He didn't ever want to feel again that gut-wrenching sensation of knowing that the thing recognized him. It knew who he was. Did it sense that another of the same person was looking in on it?

He always turned toward the wall tanks at the same moment. He saw himself floating there, and all those men had their eyes open, too. They were wide awake and perfectly aware of what was happening to them.

At least they didn't look distressed the way Ingai had looked when Eckhart found him. These men acted calm, almost like they were doing this of their own free will.

Just looking at them made Eckhart sick. He could practically feel the tubes going up his nose and down his throat, and the wires going into his arm. He couldn't imagine the nightmare the Ihi had gone through, living like that for so long.

He shuddered and grasped the edge of the bed. He hauled himself to his feet and leaned against the bed until the tremors started to subside.

He staggered across the cabin to a sink in the corner, where he splashed water on his face. He had to get the Vrali to reconfigure this cabin for him. The Vrali didn't sleep in beds, and they didn't use water to wash themselves. In fact, Eckhart still hadn't quite worked out exactly how they handled all their bodily functions.

He dried his face and got dressed before he staggered out of his cabin. He really hated sleeping at night. He wished he could stay awake for days like the Vrali did, but that wasn't going to happen.

He headed for the bridge of the destroyer *Urlae*. All the Vrali destroyers were the same size, and they were so big that all the millions of Ihi only occupied five of them.

Thagmor and his fellow guards had insisted on making this one Eckhart's personal flagship. The fifteen guards who stood sentry at Eckhart's challenge against Phrolain had basically reassigned themselves as his personal escort, too.

They didn't ask Eckhart's permission. They just did it. They accompanied him everywhere he went and liaised between Eckhart, the *Urlae* crew, and the captains and crews of all the other Vrali vessels.

When Thagmor had said three hundred Vrali ships would attend Eckhart back to the war, he didn't specifically say they'd be three hundred of these gigantic destroyers. Eckhart never could have dreamed he'd be coming back to attack the Regiment with a force this size, not to mention one equipped with the Vrali's deadly weaponry.

Eckhart turned into a corridor leading to the bridge. He rounded the corner and found Thagmor and Ingai talking in whispers. "Is anything wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing is wrong," Thagmor replied. "We are discussing our strategy against the Regiment."

Ingai studied Eckhart. "You've had another nightmare."

"Yeah." Eckhart passed his hand across his eyes. "I wish I could figure out what it means."

"Is it the same one you showed me on Gruna?"

Eckhart nodded, but he couldn't meet the creature's gaze. "It's always the same."

"You see yourself in the Regiment lab. You are the one they are experimenting on."

"It's more than that. I'm the asset the Regiment is developing to use against the fringes—the weapons. I'm practicing with the powers they gave me. I'm preparing to use those weapons against the fringe aliens."

"Is there something you want to ask me?" Ingai asked.

Eckhart's head shot up, and then he slumped. He could never hide anything from Ingai. Whatever mysterious connection the Ihi

had with each other also gave them a bird's eye view into his mind.

"Are you sure I'm not having these nightmares because I'm around so many Ihi?"

"How can you be? You started having them before you ever came to Gruna."

Eckhart sighed again. "You're right."

"There is more," Ingai replied. "You aren't telling me everything."

"It seems like the dreams are leading me to something. I had the same feeling right before I fought Phrolain. I knew what was going to happen. I didn't know what I was going to do, but I had this feeling that I knew I was going to win."

"I had the same feeling," Thagmor interrupted.

Eckhart spun around. "You did?"

"We all saw it when you faced him. There was something about you. It made no sense, because you were so much smaller and weaker, but when you faced him, I knew you were going to destroy him. It was obvious to us all."

"None of this makes any sense. I feel like something is leading me to defeat the Regiment—but *not* to defeat them. It's leading me back to the Stormbreakers. I feel like this dream I'm having is a vision of things to come. I'm going to get back on that Stormbreaker and I'm going to find myself there. I'm going to find out I really am one of these assets—or all of them." He shut his eyes and tried unsuccessfully to shake those ideas out of his head. "It's stupid. It doesn't mean anything."

Thagmor and Ingai gazed back at him with open, accepting expressions. They didn't think it was stupid, and they certainly didn't think it meant nothing.

He waved the dream away. "What were you talking about? How are we going to fight the Regiment?"

"The Ihi have been discussing the war," Ingai replied. "We've decided to continue supplying the Vrali with Destrine until the war ends."

"The destroyers won't be able to function without a supply of Destrine," Thagmor added. "We would run out, and we wouldn't be able to re-equip our weapons."

"We have no use for Destrine," Ingai went on. "It's a metabolic waste for us, so we have no reason not to provide it to the Vrali."

"But only as long as we're fighting the war on the same side,"

Thagmor corrected. “As soon as we defeat the Regiment, we’ll have to renegotiate.”

“Are you sure?” Eckhart looked back and forth between the two men. “I mean…” He turned to Ingai. “The Ihi don’t hate the Vrali for keeping them as captives all these years?”

Ingai only smiled. “That’s something we will have to renegotiate after the war. For now, we both have the same objective. These destroyers are too valuable to you, and they will be useless without Destrine.”

“How exactly do your people plan to fight the Regiment? I know you’re all still weak from the tanks. What exactly is our strategy?”

“Being in the tanks won’t stop us from fighting the Regiment. When the time comes, we’ll conquer them.”

“How?”

“Athite makes us impervious to the vacuum of space. We will leave these ships and engage with whatever power the assets are using against us.”

“Are you sure?” Eckhart shut his eyes. “Forget I said that. Of course you’re sure.”

“You don’t understand it, and you don’t have to. The Regiment weapons will not be able to harm us, nor will they be able to stop us from neutralizing them. You have nothing to worry about.”

Eckhart snorted. “You’ll forgive me if I keep worrying anyway. These assets have managed to repel everything we’ve ever thrown at them.”

Ingai inclined his head to one side and studied Eckhart more closely. “I will tell you this much. Our power will not be able to neutralize this dream. Whatever it is telling you, it will override anything we might be able to do to the Regiment. We will not be able to destroy the Stormbreakers until you get back on board and face whatever is waiting for you there.”

Eckhart froze staring at the little alien that had become his friend. Somehow, he knew everything Ingai was telling him. The dream had led him to this moment. He had to get back on board the Stormbreaker. Using the Ihi against the Regiment wouldn’t change Eckhart’s destiny, whatever that was.

Thagmor listened to this without speaking or interrupting. In the days since the Vrali fleet had left Gruna, Eckhart had come to depend on Thagmor as one of his most loyal allies.

Thagmor never once wavered on his pledge to serve Eckhart’s

cause. Thagmor dedicated his every waking hour to coordinating Eckhart's leadership between the destroyers. Thagmor made Eckhart's leadership as seamless as possible.

Now Eckhart found out that these two former enemies were working together to accomplish his objective. The discovery twisted Eckhart's heart. He'd been an outcast all his life. He'd never been able to count his friends on more than one hand.

Now all these forces came together behind him. They supported him and gave him energy and resolve to do what he had to do, but they couldn't quiet this nagging question in his mind.

The dream hovered before his eyes even when he was awake. He might be able to live with it if he could just figure out what it meant, but he wouldn't know that until he went back to the Stormbreaker in person.

He wanted to hurry up and get there so he could put it to rest. At the same time, he dreaded going there. He didn't want to find out he was one of these assets—or all of them. That would be worse than dying. He wouldn't be able to live with himself if he found out he was somehow responsible for all this killing and destruction.

How could he be responsible for it? He'd been working to the wall to stop all this, but he still carried the responsibility.

He tried to change the subject by nodding toward the bridge behind Thagmor. "How far are we from rendezvousing with the *Atera*?"

"Not far. Maybe an hour."

"You should go relax," Ingai told him. "Staying up here won't make the destroyer fly any faster."

"Relax? I don't think I know what that word means anymore."

Neither of them answered. They stood in front of him in casual postures, but the meaning couldn't be clearer. They were blocking him from going to the bridge. He'd done enough.

"Do you need to decide anything about transferring the Destrine to the destroyers?"

"We've already decided it," Thagmor replied.

Eckhart turned away with a sigh. They didn't need him.

He went downstairs to the cabin Dallas had been using for the journey back to the fleet. The Vrali hadn't modified this one at all, because Dallas didn't sleep. He stood in the center of the cabin without moving, except to tilt his helmet one way and then the other.

Eckhart strode up to him. “What are you up to, pal?”

“I’m studying the frequency readings from our last battle against the Regiment. I’m trying to adjust the frequencies so I can feed the Triorium blast back to them the way we planned.”

“Are you still determined to go through with this?”

“Of course,” Dallas countered. “It’s the best way to break the assets’ power.”

“What about the Ihi? They’ll be there, too. Ingai sounds pretty confident the Ihi can neutralize the assets on their own.” Eckhart didn’t tell Dallas the rest.

“The Ihi might be able to do it. Then again, they might not be able to do all of it. It only makes sense to hedge our bets by doing both.”

Eckhart sighed. “Do you have to be so nonchalant about something that could cost you your life?”

“Don’t start that again, Eckhart. I’m not being nonchalant about it. That’s exactly what I’m not being.”

Eckhart looked away. If Ingai was right—and Eckhart already knew he was—then Eckhart would be doing something a lot more dangerous by going on board the Stormbreaker.

He didn’t feel nonchalant about that. It scared the ever-loving shit out of him, but he knew he had to do it. He wouldn’t be able to put this war behind him until he did.

He should have known Dallas would feel the same way. Eckhart already knew what defeating the Regiment meant to Dallas. Eckhart couldn’t ask him to put that aside.

“What are you finding out about the frequencies? Are you able to adjust them?”

“I can adjust them to anything. The question is what I adjust them *to*. I won’t know if the new frequency will work until I get into battle and try it out.”

“So that means it might not work at all,” Eckhart pointed out. Then he had an idea. “You should talk to Ingai about it. Maybe he could give you a clue.”

“I already have.”

“What did he say?”

“He said he couldn’t help me because I don’t have enough organic brain tissue for him to make contact with. The Ihi can only form connections with organic life forms—which I guess I’m not anymore.”

“Damn,” Eckhart exclaimed.

“I have a plan. I’m going to try adjusting the frequency during the battle. I’m going to see if I can modulate the energy field while I’m engaging the asset.”

“Will that work?”

“I can only try.”

Eckhart rummaged in his mind for something to say, something to convince Dallas not to do this, but just then, an announcement came through the destroyer’s intercom system.

“We’re approaching the *Atera*. Communications are coming through for you.”

Eckhart touched Dallas’ shoulder one more time and went up to the bridge. The *Atera* and the rest of Eckhart’s fleet loomed across the Iriol system.

The fleet had grown since Eckhart had gone to Gruna. What looked like thousands of attack vessels spilled out of the system and into surrounding sectors.

“The *Atera*’s commanding officer is requesting personal communication with you,” Thagmor informed him. “They tried to arm and attack us until I told them that you were on board.”

“Put the communication through.”

Rixby appeared on the screen in front of Thagmor’s station. Clifton, DeWalt, and Squids flanked her.

“What are those Earthlings doing on board?” Thagmor snarled. “They should be executed.”

“They’re my friends. They’ve been helping fight the rebellion from the beginning.” Eckhart couldn’t help but grin at his friends. “How you doing, sweetheart?”

“Are you a prisoner on that ship, Eckhart?” Rixby asked. “I’m reading Dallas on board…and several million Ihi.”

“I’m not a prisoner, sweetie. Who are all your new friends?”

“Ulnus is here to see you…and the three gang leaders want to see you as soon as you land.”

“I better see them, then. I’m coming over…and don’t fire on any Vrali craft. Understand?”

“If you say so.”

Eckhart turned to Thagmor. “Come over to the *Atera* with me. Where’s Ingai?”

“He’s downstairs…oh, no, he isn’t. He’s on his way to the launch bay to meet you.”

Eckhart nodded. He'd been getting used to these telepathic connections since traveling on board a ship loaded to the gills with Ihi.

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13

Eckhart and Thagmor went downstairs to the *Urlae*'s launch bay. "What will your people think of meeting a Vrali?" Thagmor asked on the way. "They're bound to be hostile."

"If you can put aside your hostility for the Ihi—not to mention your hostility for a few Earthlings—I think they'll get over it. The three gang leaders that came to Gruna with me will see the light as soon as they realize you're working with me now."

"What about Ulnus? He will *not* put aside his hostility for the Vrali—not ever. You wait and see."

"He'll do it if he wants to be a part of this war. I'll make sure of it."

"Perhaps he won't take part in the war if you ally yourself with the Vrali. You could wind up with a much bigger mess after the war than you had when the Regiment was in charge."

Eckhart halted in the corridor to confront his friend. "We're all going to have to change the way we do things, now that we don't have the Regiment standing over us. We're going to have to come up with new trade agreements and new ways of communicating amongst ourselves. We're going to have to rebuild a new society that isn't based on the strongest gangs steamrolling everyone else to do their bidding."

Thagmor studied Eckhart for what seemed like a long time, and then sighed. "I never thought I would say this about an Earthling, but you're the best leader the fringes could ask for you. I am glad you are the one taking power in the Regiment's place."

"Yeah, well, don't bet on me just yet. I still haven't beaten them."

They kept walking, but the conversation brought up even more questions Eckhart didn't have any answers for.

He knew what he said to Thagmor was true. The fringes had been lawless for centuries, and the Regiment liked it that way. The Regiment kept it that way so the aliens didn't join forces to drive the bastards out.

All of that was going to change. Who better to make that happen than a single, all-powerful leader with the authority to command all

the gangs?

Eckhart was shaping up to be that leader, but it still seemed to be happening to someone else. He saw himself transforming into that leader, and he didn't recognize himself.

His mind switched back to the Stormbreaker. Maybe the leader the fringes needed was in those tanks. Maybe that leader started as a fetus in the beaker, developed in the tanks, and then practiced his power in the great hold.

Eckhart shook those thoughts out of his mind as he, Thagmor, Ingai, Dallas, and Eckhart's bodyguards climbed on board a small Vrali runabout. It was really just a miniature version of a destroyer. It worked the same way and all the controls were identical—not that Thagmor ever let Eckhart run them.

Thagmor never let Eckhart touch any of the *Urlae*'s controls. Eckhart was too important to do much of anything himself—or so the Vrali seemed to think. Eckhart was looking forward to getting back to the *Atera*, where people treated him like a normal person.

Thagmor steered over to the *Atera*, and Eckhart's head swam with another wave of déjà vu. His whole life was turning into this.

Rixby, Bing, Squids, Clifton, DeWalt, Innyria, Namol, and Chemorix stood in a line across the landing platform.

The gang leaders had been coming to see Eckhart like this for weeks. Now he was the one coming to visit as a guest. He was an outsider in his own life. He became even more acutely aware of the chasm between him and his friends when he stepped down with Thagmor and Ingai at his side.

The three gang leaders glared at Thagmor and the rest of Eckhart's escort. Chemorix even snarled at them.

"Stay here," Eckhart told the Vrali. "Let me handle this."

He crossed the platform. It seemed like a journey of a million miles, and the atmosphere thawed considerably when he and Dallas got near the others.

"You can't expect us to work with them, Eckhart," Namol snapped. "You never should have brought them back."

"They're here to help us. No one is asking you to like them. You might want to remember how you all felt about working with Earthlings not too long ago."

"Are you really going to bring them on board?" Squids glanced behind Eckhart toward the fifteen enormous, heavily armed Vrali standing guard. "Shouldn't we assign our own guards to make sure

they don't try anything?"

"Absolutely not. If you don't feel comfortable with all of them, Thagmor can come with us. I think you can handle one of them… just like Thagmor is going to handle one of you…" Eckhart pointed at Innyria. "And you…and you…and you…and you."

He pointed at Bing, Rixby, Squids, Chemorix, and Namol, just for effect.

He didn't want for them to answer. He walked back to the runabout, but Dallas remained behind. Eckhart heard him talking to the others behind Eckhart's back. Dallas better be telling them about what the Vrali and the Ihi had been doing on the crossing back from Gruna.

"Thagmor, you and Ingai come with me. The rest of you can stand guard here, but don't venture onto the ship. We don't want any trouble."

"We have no desire to venture onto the ship," one of the bodyguards growled. "We stick to our own."

"Good." Eckhart waved to Thagmor, and the three of them went back to the group by the elevator.

Whatever Dallas said to them must have worked. No one showed any hostility toward Thagmor—not outwardly.

Eckhart pointed out each person in turn. Thagmor and the gang leaders greeted each other as though they'd never laid eyes on each other in their lives—which was a step in the right direction.

"Let's go upstairs and we can talk about how we're going to take on the Regiment," Eckhart suggested. "We're all on the same side here, and none of the gangs will be dealing directly with the Vrali, or vice versa."

"Good," Chemorix growled.

Thagmor nodded. "Good."

Eckhart took a deep breath and waved toward the elevator. "Let's go upstairs."

Clifton and DeWalt turned around to cross the platform, but Dallas kept staring toward the Vrali ship…or so Eckhart thought.

"Ulnus is coming in to see you, Eckhart. He's bringing a hundred of his lieutenants with him…and they're all armed."

The whole party spun around to see another craft coming toward the *Atera*'s landing platform. It was a whole lot bigger than the others, and moving fast.

Someone on the runabout must have alerted Eckhart's

bodyguards of the same thing. The fourteen bodyguards turned around, and they all raised their weapons to aim at the incoming ship.

Dallas barged forward and slotted out his assault guns. He made it halfway across the platform before Eckhart caught up with him. “Don’t shoot! Don’t fire on Ulnus! Wait and see what he wants before you fire.”

The bodyguards and Dallas didn’t stand down. They all kept aiming as the strange vessel entered the platform and landed at a safe distance from the Vrali runabout. Dallas and the bodyguards all pivoted to train their weapons on the new arrival.

Eckhart tried to step around Dallas to approach the ship, but Dallas shot out one massive arm and blocked him. Eckhart tried one more time to press past his friend, but Dallas rooted himself to the floor and forced Eckhart behind him.

A set of stairs detached from the strange ship, and Ulnus descended with at least thirty of his kind—all armed to the teeth.

The Vrali advanced and positioned themselves between Dallas and Eckhart on one side and Ulnus’ people on the other. They aimed their weapons straight in Ulnus’ face.

Ulnus turned up his nose at the Vrali and grimaced at Eckhart. “Is this how you repay your allies’ loyalty, Eckhart? How dare you poison our movement with these killers?”

A squeak startled Eckhart from his side. He glanced down and noticed Rixby standing by his leg. He didn’t see her come forward until now. “You’re as much of a killer as the Vrali, Ulnus.”

“I didn’t agree to fight this war with *them*. Either they leave now and never show their hideous faces in this part of space, or we will withdraw from the war ourselves. You can kiss our army goodbye, Eckhart.”

Eckhart started to reply, but Rixby interrupted again. “You never agreed to fight in the first place, Ulnus. You came because Yausqith would have razed your whole planet if you refused.”

Ulnus’ furious eyes snapped down to her. “You talk big, little Gnovonia. Our army could crush you in a second if we wanted to.”

“Maybe, but I should remind you that I’m still on good terms with Yausqith. If anything happens to me or if you betray Eckhart’s authority, you’ll answer to him.”

Ulnus glared at her and then at Eckhart. “I won’t forget this.”

“I hope not,” Rixby said. “You’re here under Eckhart’s authority,

and you'll stay under it until I release you from your pledge…if you ever want to go home, that is."

"The Vrali are our enemies," Ulnus snarled. "They will always be our enemies, and as soon as this war ends, we will exact our revenge."

"You'll do nothing of the kind—not without Eckhart's permission," Rixby replied. "You'll stay under his authority, and if he decides you have to get along with the Vrali and be friends, you will be."

Ulnus huffed once and turned away. "We'll see about that."

He took two steps when a howling shriek blasted through the landing platform. The next second, all the ships parked nearby skidded sideways and smashed into the wall. The *Atera* tipped up on one side, and Eckhart landed on the floor. Only Dallas remained upright.

Rixby screamed. "What's happening?"

Ingai raced to Eckhart's side and started to pick him up. "The Regiment is attacking! We must retaliate now while we have the chance."

"It must be the space distortion again." Eckhart turned to the bodyguards nearest him. "Get back to the *Urlae* and alert the rest of the Ihi that we're going into battle against the Regiment."

He staggered on his way back to the elevator. Squids, Bing, and the two Earthlings were already running into it. "Get back to your fleets!" Eckhart told the three gang leaders.

"We won't leave!" Innyria countered. "Whatever you're going to do to the Regiment, we're going with you."

"All right! Just get back to your people. I'll contact you when I know—"

A crushing bang pounded the *Atera*, and Rixby pitched over again. Eckhart lunged and grabbed her before she bowled across the floor.

Everyone raced off in different directions. Thagmor, Ingai, and the other Vrali got their runabout airborne first. They streaked away, back to the *Urlae*. Eckhart didn't even have time to say goodbye to them.

Innyria and Namol got to their ships next, but Innyria's was too badly damaged. "Take the *Marathon*!" Eckhart told him. "Go!"

Eckhart made sure Chemorix made it outside, too, but when Eckhart turned to get into the elevator, Dallas rocketed past him.

He plunged through the hatch and zoomed amongst the ships gathering for the assault.

Eckhart raced up to the bridge. “What’s the damage?”

“The distortion is targeting us!” Rixby screamed. “The other fleets are undamaged. They aren’t even moving.”

Eckhart braced himself against the podium and read the controls to see what she meant. The *Atera*, the *Kestera*, the *Eotera*, and the *Sitera* jerked and convulsed in a tiny bubble all by themselves.

The distortion folded and twisted the space around the four battlecruisers. It pummeled the ships against each other and fired the ships’ weapons into their own sister ships. The field even left Dallas alone.

The other alien fleets watched from beyond the perimeter. The *Urlae*, the *Marathon*, and several others tried to charge in to save the four battlecruisers, but the distortion only tossed them away.

The *Urlae* fired a blistering plasma jet into the distortion. Eckhart watched in horror as the distortion skidded the *Eotera* into the shot’s path and the plasma smashed into the ship’s hull.

“The *Eotera* is hit!” Rixby squealed. “Triorium drive is down! The distortion is targeting Triorium drive on all four cruisers.”

A force beyond comprehension flipped the *Atera* and hurled the ship sideways. It crashed into the *Kestera*, and a devastating impact threw everyone off their feet.

Rixby somersaulted through the air, crashed into the wall, and landed hard on the floor. She lay there whimpering until Clifton jumped out of his seat. He hurried over to her and picked her up.

Eckhart fought his way back to the podium and climbed up to examine the controls. No one would work them for him here. “Triorium drive is down on both ships! We’re disarmed.”

The *Urlae* and four other Vrali destroyers charged the distortion again. The space bubble widened to swallow them, but as soon as the destroyers got within range, the *Urlae* fired again. Plasma spurted from the guns, and the distortion whipped the *Sitera* into the path of the blast, but the shot didn’t pierce the distortion.

A glowing blue halo surrounded the whole distortion, and all the ships inside the bubble held still.

Creaks and groans echoed through the *Atera*’s hull, but at least the ship wasn’t jumping around anymore. Tearing sounds kept racking the ship as the distortion tried unsuccessfully to continue its assault.

Clifton carried Rixby off the bridge and vanished. Eckhart's fingers flew over his instruments. "All four battlecruisers have taken damage—and none of them has Triorium drive anymore. Injury reports are coming in from all over."

He tried to signal the *Urlae*, but communications wouldn't penetrate the field. The *Urlae* stood off aiming that plasma beam at the distortion, but no one could move like this.

"We can't go after the Regiment like this," DeWalt remarked from the scanner operator's station. "We have no weapons at all anymore."

Eckhart started to reply, but at that moment, the *Urlae* fired an even more devastating fountain of plasma. It blasted the distortion field, and the force holding the *Atera* exploded.

The hull cracked and crunched on all sides, but a second later, the noise vanished along with the plasma burst and the distortion.

Communications switched back on, and Ingai appeared on Eckhart's console. "I'm coming over, Eckhart. The Ihi will repair your ship."

"How? These ships are useless without Triorium drive."

"We have something much more powerful—something that will serve you much better when it comes to fighting the Regiment."

"What is it?"

Ingai grinned at him. "Destrine drive."

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14

Eckhart, Rixby, and DeWalt strode through the *Atera*'s engine section and halted on a raised catwalk well out of the way of repairs. Vrali crewmen worked all over the ship's systems.

"Are you sure this will work?" Rixby asked. "The Triorium drive isn't designed to work on Destrine."

"I trust the Vrali to fit our ships to run on Destrine. If I didn't trust them to do anything else, I'd trust that. They're experts on Destrine drive."

"What about *them*?" DeWalt nodded to ten Ihi crouching in the corner. "They don't look capable of doing anything. Are we really betting all our lives on them?"

"They're all very confident they can take the Regiment out." Eckhart didn't tell them about his dream. He didn't want to think about the dream ever again, even as it got stronger by the day.

The three friends turned back to watch the Vrali at work.

"They certainly are thorough," DeWalt remarked. "They've gone over every detail of the four Triorium battlecruisers with a fine-toothed comb."

"And made a few enemies while they were at it," Rixby replied. "You haven't made your crew very happy bringing the Vrali on board, Eckhart. No one will ever get used to having them around."

"We don't have to get used to having them around. We just have to work with them to finish this war. Then we can all go home. I'm sure that's all the Vrali want, too."

"Have you seen the reports?" DeWalt asked. "Some of the *Atera* crew have even insulted the Vrali to their faces."

"I've seen all the reports, and I couldn't be happier with how the Vrali have been handling themselves. They've never risen to the bait or even responded. They just go on with their work. I've never seen crewmen with their energy and dedication. They're making me proud to have them around."

"Still…" Rixby cast a suspicious glance toward the engines. "They're Vrali."

"I know they are, sweetie. That's the point."

"What exactly are they doing to convert the Triorium drives to

Destrine drive?" DeWalt asked. "I don't understand it."

"I don't even try to understand how it works. The Vrali can handle it."

"Certain people are suggesting the Vrali were the ones who did all this to damage to sabotage your fleet. Certain people think the Vrali are playing you."

"Nothing will ever convince me of that. Are you telling me the Vrali are in league with the Regiment? The *Urlae* neutralized that distortion."

"The Ihi neutralized that distortion."

Eckhart threw up both hands. "I'm not going to stand around and listen to slander against the Vrali. They're here to help us. They wouldn't be doing all this work otherwise."

He started to walk away when a deep rumble went through the engine room. The Vrali crewmen stood back as the pipes, turbines, and compressors rising to the ceiling started to hum and knock.

The next second, the entire Triorium drive started vibrating at a fast hum, and glowing blue light radiated out of all the pipes. The entire engine radiated soft blue light into the engine room.

Destrine streamed through the pipes and turned them translucent. The gentle swirl of plasma flowed and undulated inside.

The Ihi stood off to one side of the room. They all placed their hands on one section of the engine, and the Destrine flowed from them into the Triorium drive.

"It's working!" Rixby said.

"Get up to the bridge!" Eckhart ordered. "Make sure all the ship's systems are functioning right."

She scurried away, but Eckhart and DeWalt remained behind. The blue shimmering glow infected Eckhart's mind. He couldn't look away.

He blinked and snapped to another reality. He knew he was wide awake and not dreaming, and this time, he didn't go inside the central Stormbreaker.

He hovered on the edge of the Keilara system, watching the *Atera*, the Vrali destroyers, the *Marathon*, Ulnus' army, and all the thousands of ships of the alien force move in on the Regiment position.

His dream awareness magnified Dallas flying next to the *Atera*. Thousands upon millions of microscopic blue dots of light floated in

a gleaming throng around the whole fleet.

The fleet came within weapons range, and Dallas rocketed forward. All the Stormbreakers joined their lasers into one colossal beam that struck Dallas hard and stopped him in midflight.

The blue pinpricks hurtled forward and surrounded the Regiment in a massive swirling torrent of light. They didn't attack the Regiment as much as just occupy the space around the Colossuses.

The Regiment's weapons didn't work with the Ihi there, and the rest of the fleet raced in for the attack. Lasers, plasma bursts, rockets, and every other kind of weapon popped and flashed on the Colossuses' hulls.

Eckhart watched it all from a safe distance. He tried to will himself to fly over there and help out, but he couldn't move. The vision held him motionless. He could only watch the battle unfold.

A Colossus near the end of the line detonated in a massive fireball. The *Marathon* whizzed out of the fire and unloaded on the next Colossus along. The *Sitera* and a bunch of Jackal Clan ships joined in to help out. The Jackal Clan still had Triorium drive, and made short work of the Colossuses.

The Vrali destroyers went after the Stormbreakers. Destrine jets bombarded the warships on all sides, and one of the Stormbreakers started to cave in.

The Ihi concentrated their power toward the center, where the Stormbreakers' formation sprayed Datrium in all directions. They even shot Datrium at the Ihi, but none of the Regiment's shots seemed to land.

Even with the Ihi blockading the Stormbreakers in a solid wall of light, enough Ihi still surrounded the Colossuses to render them defenseless against the combined alien horde.

More Colossuses blasted to pieces on the outer edges, and then the first Stormbreaker exploded. The fireball flared to envelope thousands of Ihi, but the fire didn't damage them.

More alien ships from the perimeter swooped in and attacked the remaining Stormbreakers. The laser holding Dallas in place weakened, but he still couldn't break free.

The aliens surrounded one Stormbreaker, hammering it with all their firepower. The laser beam faltered, and Dallas zoomed forward before the beam re-established and caught him a second time. He fought it, but it held.

The Colossuses started falling like dominoes leading from the exterior inward. Each explosion left the alien fleet free to assault the next ship, and the rate of conquest built to a rapid drumbeat of explosions echoing all the way to Eckhart's position.

Another Stormbreaker went up in smoke, followed by five more Colossuses, and then the alien horde concentrated everything on the center Stormbreaker. The last few Colossuses detonated.

In seconds, the aliens had decimated the Regiment—all except that one Stormbreaker.

Eckhart stared at it in a kind of horror. This was the only Stormbreaker that mattered anymore. It was *his* Stormbreaker, but he couldn't get near it.

The aliens pounded it with every gun in their arsenal, but they couldn't touch it. The laser shooting from it blazed as powerfully as it ever had with the other six warships joining in. This Stormbreaker could hold Dallas at bay with no help from anyone.

A sick feeling sneaked into Eckhart's stomach, and he knew what was going to happen a second before it happened.

The Jackal Clan plunged in to target the Stormbreaker's hull at the point where the laser came out. The ship didn't have any aperture or weapons port. Of course it didn't. The laser didn't come from the hull. It came from the asset buried deep inside the ship.

The Jackal Clan fired Triorium ejections on the laser, and a deafening report ricocheted down the beam. It fed back to the Stormbreaker and outward along the laser.

The blast hit Dallas, and he exploded in an epic boom that sent a shockwave crawling across the Keilara system. It smashed Eckhart in the face and he buckled to his knees on the catwalk, gasping and retching.

DeWalt grabbed his elbow and tried to pick Eckhart up. "What the hell happened? Are you okay?"

Cold sweat drenched Eckhart all over. He couldn't breathe. He hugged his arms tight over his stomach, fighting to keep his sanity, but he couldn't block the sight out of his mind. Dallas. Dallas was going to die in the upcoming battle.

The gentle glow of Destrine flowing through the *Atera*'s engines hypnotized Eckhart all over again, but that only made the vision clearer. It forced the image into his brain, where he couldn't get rid of it.

DeWalt finally succeeded in hauling Eckhart to his feet. "Call

Bing," DeWalt told one of the mechanics behind Eckhart's back. "Tell him it's an emergency."

"No!" Eckhart croaked. "I'm…okay."

"You're about as far from okay as it's possible to be. You're going to the medical bay."

"No!" Eckhart tore himself away and stumbled back up the catwalk. DeWalt tried to keep up with him, but Eckhart lost him when he got to the stairs leading back to the corridor.

He picked up the pace once he got off by himself. He had to find Dallas. Eckhart had to find a way to stop Dallas from taking part in the battle. He couldn't let this vision come true, not for anything.

Eckhart got confused about where he was and finally lurched back to the hall outside the crew quarters. He, Clifton, and DeWalt stayed here. Dallas had been using a cabin on this level—not because he needed it. He just used it when he wanted somewhere to go to be by himself.

Eckhart turned into the hall…and stopped in his tracks when he met Ingai coming toward him. He couldn't look at his friend. The understanding in Ingai's eyes made Eckhart sick.

Eckhart sped up and crossed to Dallas' door, but he hesitated to go inside. Ingai didn't say anything. He was just there. He already knew everything.

Eckhart summoned his resolve and opened the door. He walked in without knocking and found Dallas standing at another workstation. Eckhart couldn't look at what he was working on. Eckhart thought he already knew.

"I think I've finally figured out which frequencies to use on the Stormbreakers," Dallas told him. "I'm sure it will work this time."

Eckhart swallowed hard. "I don't want you to do this. The Ihi have already shown they can break that space distortion. We shouldn't put you in danger when the Ihi can do it."

Dallas looked up. "Just because they can neutralize the space distortion doesn't mean they'll be able to neutralize the Stormbreakers. The Regiment will concentrate all their weapons around the Stormbreakers. They'd sooner lose their Colossuses than let us destroy the Stormbreakers."

"I know that, but I still don't want you to go. It's too dangerous. If the Stormbreakers turn out to be too strong, we could lose you, too."

"We've been over this, Eckhart. I'm going out whether you want

me to or not."

Eckhart felt his last nerve preparing to snap. "Dallas…I'm begging you not to do this. Please, as a friend, just sit this one out—just once—for me."

Dallas studied him through his optical lens. Eckhart felt himself shaking. He wanted to fall through the floor and disappear rather than have Dallas look at him like that, but Eckhart couldn't break that gaze. He couldn't walk away as long as Dallas held him in that unbreakable stare.

A second later, Dallas looked down at his instruments and went back to what he was doing. He kept bringing up readings and adjusting this and that. He didn't look at Eckhart again, and he didn't answer.

Eckhart's stomach clenched. That was it. That was the only answer Dallas would ever give him. He'd made his decision, and nothing Eckhart could say or do would stop what was about to happen.

Eckhart watched him in misery. The quantatid had done a hell of a lot more than turn Dallas into an unfeeling robot with no personality. If anything, it had made Dallas even stronger, even more the sturdy, deep-feeling man that Eckhart knew and cared about. Dallas had become even more the person Eckhart longed to save from this terrible fate.

Whatever the quantatid did to Dallas, it made him even more resolved to do his part and make amends for the past. It burned away the dregs of indecision and left this determined warrior with nothing but his own destiny before him.

Eckhart couldn't feel his legs. They carried him out of Dallas' quarters and brought him to a stop in front of Ingai.

"He's going, isn't he?" Ingai asked.

Eckhart nodded, too devastated to say a word. How could he order the assault and send Dallas to his death?

He had to. Eckhart's own destiny waited for him in the Keilara system. Dallas was just another speed bump on the road. Eckhart's feelings for Dallas were the biggest speed bump of all, and speed bumps no longer stopped Eckhart from doing what had to be done.

Ingai moved in front of Eckhart's face and peered deep into his eyes. At least someone in this mess knew what Eckhart saw. He didn't have to carry the vision alone, even if he had to carry his destiny alone. No one could live that for him.

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15

Eckhart pointed to a chart of the Keilara system. “The Regiment only has forty Colossuses and seven Stormbreakers, but we can’t underestimate the assets’ power.”

“We don’t even know what these assets *are*,” Innyria countered. “They never show themselves.”

“That’s why you, Namol, and Chemorix will attack the outer perimeter—here and here. Don’t split your formation the way you did last time, Innyria. Each of you target individual Colossuses and destroy them from the outside in, toward the center.”

“What about the assets?” Namol asked.

“Dallas and the Ihi will neutralize the assets. The Ihi will deploy along with the rest of the fleet. They’ll be all over the battlefield, but you don’t have to worry about hitting them. They can defend themselves against your weaponry.”

“How do you know?” Rixby asked from the table at Eckhart’s elbow. “We haven’t seen the Ihi in battle.”

“Call it inside intelligence.” Eckhart pointed to the central Stormbreaker. “This Stormbreaker will be concentrating the other warships’ lasers into one beam. Dallas will neutralize that, so as long as you stay out of the main beam, it shouldn’t bother you, either.”

Nearly everyone at the table glanced over at Dallas, but he didn’t respond. He stood there immobile and impenetrable. He didn’t ask how Eckhart knew any of this, either, and Eckhart didn’t tell him.

“Once you finish with the Colossuses, that will free you all up to focus on the Stormbreakers. Start with these six.” Eckhart pointed out the other Stormbreakers. “Leave this one until last.”

“Then what?” Ulnus asked. “If all the assets are on this Stormbreaker, destroying the others won’t give us any advantage over this one.”

“I know. Once we finish off all the other Regiment vessels, the Jackal Clan will swoop in and bombard the last Stormbreaker with Triorium. That will set off a chain reaction that should feed back and destroy the Stormbreaker.”

“You tried that last time,” Rixby countered. “It didn’t work.”

“I adjusted my frequencies,” Dallas replied. “It’ll work this time.”

“You hope it will,” Clifton argued. “An explosion that big could destroy you instead.”

“That’s my decision,” Dallas replied.

“Not if it puts the rest of us in danger,” Innyria chimed in. “We should go over the readings on these frequencies before we launch the assault. What’s the point of going into battle in the first place when we don’t know we can win?”

“We don’t need to go over the frequencies,” Rixby added. “Going over them won’t give us any clue about whether they’ll work. The whole thing is pure speculation.”

“What about the Ihi?” Bing asked. “You went to a lot of trouble to bring them here. Are they going to attack the Stormbreaker, too? Isn’t that what they’re here for? They aren’t just going to sit there and neutralize the assets when they could tip the scales in our favor.”

Eckhart winced. He couldn’t exactly explain everything he knew about the battle before it happened.

“The Ihi will assault the Stormbreakers,” Ingai told them. “Once you destroy the Colossuses, we will all assault the Stormbreakers.”

“The Destrine drive of all Eckhart’s fleet and the Vrali destroyers will overcome the Stormbreakers,” Thagmor added. “Even if the Triorium explosion doesn’t work, we have other weapons.”

Eckhart’s gaze skipped around the conference room table. Rixby, Bing, Squids, Clifton, DeWalt, and Dallas joined the three gang leaders, Ulnus, Thagmor, and Ingai—all the leaders who’d be taking part in the battle.

Thagmor and Ingai didn’t let on about Eckhart’s pre-knowledge of the outcome. No amount of bombarding the central Stormbreaker would destroy it. Only Eckhart could do that, though he still didn’t know how exactly he was supposed to do it.

The others studied the chart. “I don’t like this,” Rixby muttered. “It leaves too many holes in the plan. We need to do more planning.”

“Like you said, more planning won’t make us better prepared. All the gangs are chomping at the bit to attack the Regiment. If we wait much longer, we’ll only weaken our own position.”

“Still…” She trailed off.

“We’ve waited long enough. We have the Ihi and the whole Vrali fleet with us. We’ll never be better prepared than we are now.”

He waited, but no one said anything else. Eckhart measured everyone at the table. He didn’t need to ask if Dallas, Namol, Innyria, the Ihi, and the Vrali were ready. They were only waiting for the others to stop dithering.

“If there are no more questions, you all know what you need to do.” Eckhart turned to Rixby. “You’ll be in charge of the *Atera*’s fleet. I’m going out on the *Marathon*.”

She squeaked in surprise. “No! You can’t!”

“I am. The Jackal Clan has fitted the ship with both Triorium drive and Destrine drive. I’m going out.”

She made a moaning sound under her fur. “This is terrible!”

“I’m in charge of this. I have to go.”

Bing put his arms around her and lifted her off the table. He hugged her and shot Eckhart an accusing look. Eckhart read the same expression on DeWalt’s and Clifton’s faces.

No one on that whole side of the table understood what he was doing or why he was doing it. None of them approved, but that didn’t touch him anymore.

After his last conversation with Dallas, Eckhart had crossed a line that had been waiting for him all this time. Dallas was the one who’d pushed him over it.

Eckhart had to be the one to fire on Dallas. He couldn’t leave that to anyone else. If destroying the Regiment meant losing Dallas, Eckhart had to be the one to strike that blow. He wouldn’t shrink from his destiny any longer.

He’d been the one to get Namol’s mechanics and the Vrali to modify the *Marathon*. Eckhart had modified the ship hundreds of times since he’d first bought it, but he couldn’t do this himself.

The ship had never been more powerful, but none of that mattered anymore. Eckhart had to coordinate this battle. He had to lead the fleet. He couldn’t sit around on the *Atera*’s bridge watching.

Neither Namol nor Thagmor questioned why Eckhart wanted to modify the *Marathon*. They were both too warlike to care about anything but getting the job done. To them, any improvement to any ship made good sense, and Eckhart was starting to see their point.

“You all know what you need to do,” he finally announced.

“Clifton and DeWalt will work with Rixby on the bridge along, with Squids. Bing, you’re with me.”

Bing burst into a huge grin. “Just like old times, huh?”

“Not exactly.”

“The Jackal Clan is ready to roll when you give the word, Eckhart,” Namol added.

“We all are,” Thagmor chimed in. “This is long overdue.”

“Then you can all deploy. You can fall in formation with my fleet and—”

A gunshot banged into the *Atera* and the ship shuddered. Another dozen thumps struck the new Destrine shields.

Rixby hopped over to the controls embedded in the table. “We’re under attack! We’re taking laser shots on our starboard side! The whole fleet is under bombardment!”

Eckhart sidestepped to look down between her feet. “Who’s attacking us?”

He froze when he saw the shots coming from Ulnus’ army. Eckhart’s head snapped up and his eyes met Ulnus’. “What are you doing, Ulnus?”

Ulnus bared his teeth and hissed. “You are a coward, Earthling. You will die and a real alien will take your place in this campaign.”

More shots pounded the shields, but they didn’t cause as much damage as before. The *Atera* didn’t even move.

A split second’s thought crossed Eckhart mind. He couldn’t let Ulnus get away with such a blatant act of treachery. He couldn’t stand by and tolerate Ulnus attacking the *Atera* on the very eve of battle.

Eckhart didn’t have a chance to act before Dallas stabbed his arm at Ulnus, snapped out his assault gun, and fired straight into Ulnus’ face. The wobbly body collapsed to the floor, oozing blood everywhere.

Datrium vapor billowed from the gun barrel. Eckhart didn’t even have time to react, and now Ulnus was dead.

“The Vrali are assaulting Ulnus’ army,” Rixby said.

Eckhart pounced on the controls and punched the console. He opened a communications channel to the whole alien horde. “All ships—destroy Ulnus’ army—full assault! Wipe them out to the last man! Leave no survivors!”

The party around the conference table exploded in all directions. Thagmor and Ingai bolted out the door, followed closely by the

three gang leaders. They vanished into the elevator.

Eckhart and his core group stepped out onto the bridge to see the whole fleet up in arms. Ulnus' army formed ranks to defend themselves, but the tide was already turning.

Ulnus had thousands of ships, but they couldn't stand against the combined might of the other fleets. The Vrali struck the first blow. Their Destrine weapons carved a path of destruction into the farthest end of Ulnus' line.

Ulnus' army made their stand facing the *Atera* and the three gangs. That left Ulnus' ships exposed from the side, and the Vrali exploited that weakness to the maximum.

The Vrali plunged into Ulnus' ranks, destroying everything in their path. They shattered the formation, and dozens of Ulnus' ships spun around to confront the Vrali.

The three gangs raced ahead of Eckhart's fleet and pounded Ulnus' remaining ships from the front. In a few seconds, the battle dissolved into a chaotic jumble of explosions and erupting weapons.

An instant later, the Ihi launched from the Vrali destroyers. They drifted straight through the destroyers' hulls, and thousands of blue pinpricks of light flooded the battlefield.

They emerged in a vast flood of sparks that whooshed toward Ulnus' army. A swarm of microscopic fireflies surrounded Ulnus' fleet, and every one of those ships froze in place. They couldn't move or shoot.

The gangs and the Vrali struck fast and sure. They blasted every one of Ulnus' ships to smithereens in a brutal shooting galley of blood and death. The Ihi held Ulnus' army defenseless before the gangs' vengeance.

Ships exploded all over the field, but Eckhart couldn't even bring himself to regret this. He turned to Rixby. "Get a visual feed on this and transmit it to every planet on the fringes. Make sure everybody sees it, so they all understand what happens to anyone who betrays our cause."

She stared at him in shocked horror and didn't move. He prepared himself to get stern with her when DeWalt answered from across the bridge. "I'm recording the feed now. It's transmitting."

Eckhart relaxed and turned his attention back to the battle that was rapidly turning into a massacre. The Ihi released the last few ships from Ulnus' force, but they didn't stand a chance against the Vrali and the gangs.

In a matter of minutes, the Vrali returned to their formation and the gangs retreated back to Eckhart's fleet. "It's finished, Eckhart," Innyria reported.

Eckhart bumped Bing's shoulder. "Let's go. Dallas, you can launch whenever you're ready." He headed for the elevator and called over his shoulder as the three friends entered it. "And somebody get that piece of shit out of the conference room."

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16

The alien fleet glided into position at the Keilara system's outer rim. Eckhart steered the *Marathon* up next to the *Atera*.

The view on the tactical grid looked different from his vision, but the similarities in his perspective snapped him back into the vision as if he was hanging in space with no ship surrounding him.

The Colossuses flanked the Stormbreakers in exactly the same positions as his vision. Nothing moved over there, but he measured every inch of the battlefield—or what would be the battlefield.

Dallas hovered right next to the *Marathon*. How fitting that he, Eckhart, and Bing should go into battle together, probably for the last time.

Dallas eyed the Stormbreakers with the same flinty determination. Eckhart understood now why he hadn't given in when Eckhart asked him not to come.

Of course Dallas had to come. Eckhart was just a speed bump for Dallas, too. Eckhart understood that well enough, now that he'd finally gotten over his feelings for Dallas.

Well, he didn't get over them. They just didn't stop him anymore. Eckhart knew exactly what he had to do. He had to get onto that Stormbreaker, and he could only do that by firing the Triorium blast that destroyed Dallas.

A subtle blue light floated out of the Vrali destroyers farther down the line, and at that signal, Dallas charged. Datrium flared from his feet, and his jet thrusters propelled him headlong toward the Stormbreakers.

The whole fleet launched at the same instant. The Ihi streaked hot on Dallas' trail, and Eckhart punched the throttle to the wall.

He opened fire with his Destrine pulses first and fell in with the Jackal Clan. He had to stick close to them so he'd be ready when the time came to fire his Triorium ejections.

The Ihi flooded the battlefield as the whole fleet attacked in force. The Chosen and the Immortals cut wide to starboard and started carving into the Regiment line on the far end. The Jackal Clan took the port side, with the Vrali rushing everywhere at once. Eckhart's fleet got lost in the mayhem, and clouds of Destrine

enveloped every Colossus.

Eckhart swooped in on one huge battleship and added his shots to the Jackal Clan's assault. He circled the giant ship, pounding the hull with Destrine. He rocketed out the other side in time to see the Stormbreakers fire their lasers.

All seven beams joined into a massive laser that fired into space. It smashed into Dallas and he skidded to a halt thousands of parsecs from the battle, but his maneuver worked. He concentrated the Stormbreakers' power on himself. The Regiment couldn't use that weapon against the alien horde.

Eckhart lost sight of his friend in another Destrine barrage. Vrali destroyers blocked Eckhart's path, and Colossuses erupted in flames all over the place. Eckhart had his hands full just dodging every other ship on the field.

Glowing blue orbs dotted the area. They didn't even look like people anymore, and Eckhart couldn't make out the Ihi inside each one. Their plasma streamed outward from each orb and flooded the field with a soft blue light, but other than that, Eckhart didn't see the Ihi doing anything. If he ever missed his aim and flew through one of them, they disintegrated, and he passed through without damaging them.

He burst through another exploding Colossus and almost collided with one of the Stormbreakers. Datrium blasted from its guns, hammering the Vrali destroyers crawling all around it, but the Stormbreaker couldn't penetrate the Destrine shields.

More Vrali assembled from both sides and added their fire to the assault. So many Colossuses blew apart at the other perimeter that the Ihi started to converge on the Stormbreakers. The alien horde was winning.

Deep, husky Vrali voices crackled through Eckhart's controls. "Get clear of the Stormbreaker! It's starting to collapse!"

The destroyers somersaulted away to surround the next nearest Stormbreaker, but the Ihi remained in thicker and thicker clusters around the stricken warship. They unleashed their plasma on the Stormbreaker and the hull imploded even further.

The sight electrified Eckhart, and he fired every ounce of his Destrine at the thing. This moment brought the work of months to fruition. His whole being craved the destruction of these wretched criminals.

He spiraled around the Stormbreaker, targeting its weakest hull

plates. Explosions flashed inside the fuselage. He cartwheeled sideways and came in for another pass.

"Get clear now!" Bing hollered from navigation. "The Datrium cistern is going up!"

Eckhart shifted his hand on the regulators and activated the Destrine shields just in time. A withering boom reported out of the Stormbreaker, and then a towering column of combusting plasma erupted from the breached hull. It enveloped the *Marathon*, but the Destrine protected the ship against everything. Eckhart whooped in glee and raced off to the next Stormbreaker, where the Vrali were already carving holes in the warship's hull.

"Four more Colossuses to go!" Innyria called from the other end of the line. "Alien fleet—converge on the Stormbreakers! Jackal Clan—do your work!"

"Converging!" Namol replied. "Jackal Clan—Triorium drive!"

Those words set Eckhart's hair on end. This was it. He could think about it and dream about it all he liked. Now he actually had to do it.

He whizzed between three more Stormbreakers. The Jackal Clan overran the Vrali, and in no time, very little space remained around the Stormbreakers.

Eckhart gunned the engines out the other side of the battle to take a look around. The Immortals engaged in a raging gun war against two stubborn Colossuses that just wouldn't die. The Ihi went after the last two that held their position well away from the Stormbreakers, but all the remaining Colossuses were going down fast.

Dallas hovered at the end of the laser, far from the battle. Another Stormbreaker went down, and the beam stuttered. He shot forward, only to get stopped again a moment later.

Two more Stormbreakers exploded, and a giant supernova of fire billowed through the battlefield. The shockwave went straight through the Ihi and flowed past the Vrali's Destrine shields. Nothing touched them.

The wave swept the *Marathon*'s shields, and when it passed, Eckhart got a clear view of the battle.

The giant central Stormbreaker cut its laser into three. One beam held Dallas in place while the other two sliced into the alien fleet.

The twin beams slashed this way and that, targeting anything

and everything. They glanced off Destrine shields and vaporized through Ihi, but they hit their mark on more than one of the gang ships.

"Immortals and Chosen—fall back!" Eckhart ordered. "Jackal Clan—withdraw!"

"No damn way!" Namol snarled. "We came here to finish this. We don't give a damn what they throw at us."

Eckhart started to say something, but at that moment, another flash of his vision hit him dead between the eyes. The Immortals and the Chosen withdrew to leave the Jackal Clan a clear run for the Stormbreakers. Triorium ejections bombarded the Stormbreakers on all sides. This was it. They were targeting the laser.

Eckhart smashed the throttle down and plunged into the battle, streaking for the laser. He plowed between Jackal Clan ships and Vrali destroyers swarming as thick as flies around the Stormbreakers.

The Ihi rushed their targets, too. Destrine flew thick and fast, but Eckhart didn't see any of that. He rotated around the Stormbreaker and fired into the beam. Triorium jetted from his guns and struck the beam just as Namol and ten other Jackal Clan attackers hit it from the opposite side.

They were all flying so fast they had to break off their fire to avoid colliding with each other. Namol peeled one way and his comrades tumbled the other while the *Marathon* rocketed between them, but the damage was done.

A catastrophic concussion smashed the *Marathon* from behind. Eckhart barely had time to check the regulators before the shockwave hit him. He struggled to right the ship before the shockwave overtook him, toppled the *Marathon* end over end, and boomed out to the farthest reaches of the solar system.

Eckhart strained to sit up and pulled the ship back into an upright position. The bottom dropped out of his world all over again when he spotted Dallas plummeting inside the laser beam.

He didn't explode the way he had in Eckhart's vision. Dallas didn't get thrown clear of the blast, either. The explosion didn't damage the laser at all.

It remained locked on Dallas, and he rolled head over heel down the beam on a headlong plunge for the one surviving Stormbreaker.

The ship loomed as huge and deadly as ever. The alien assault

didn't damage it or even touch it.

Dallas flipped again and again, dozens of times. He twisted inside the beam, but he couldn't break out of it. The beam got shorter and shorter, drawing him nearer and nearer until he fell straight through the hull. He vanished inside the ship, and the laser blinked out to nothing.

Every ship on the field held still, watching Dallas disappear inside the Stormbreaker. Eckhart's hands went numb on the regulators. Bing stared into the tactical grid, but there was nothing left to see there. Dallas was gone, but not gone. He was inside the Stormbreaker.

The Ihi hovered in space for a moment, and then they all migrated over to the Vrali destroyers. The thousands of blue dots vaporized inside and left the battlefield dark, cold, silent, and deserted. The entire Regiment force had been wiped out…except for that one Stormbreaker—Eckhart's Stormbreaker.

He was alone with it on the battlefield. It lingered there only for him. Nothing remained but him and it. The way to his destiny lay clear, with no more speed bumps to slow him down.

The Vrali destroyers started to drift away. The three gangs fell in line, and last of all, the *Atera* led Eckhart's fleet back to the Keilara system's outer rim, where they'd started.

Eckhart shivered and took hold of the regulators. He turned back and steered into the *Atera*'s landing platform.

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17

Bing followed Eckhart onto the *Atera*'s landing platform. Eckhart went straight to the weapons locker and started taking down sidearms, pounders—anything he could carry.

He loaded them all and stashed the sidearms in his boots, in his belt, in his pockets—everywhere. He took out ammunition, Halfanite blocks, and primers when Bing stuck his arm into the locker and took down another pounder.

"What are you doing?" Eckhart asked.

"I'm arming myself. What are you doing?"

"I'm going after Dallas, but you aren't going."

Bing only smiled at him. Eckhart started to get annoyed when someone bumped his other side.

Thagmor held out one of the Vrali guns Eckhart had first used on Gruna. "You might want to take a few of these."

Eckhart took it, and then frowned when Thagmor started loading three more of the same kind of gun—one for each of his sets of arms. Ingai stood at his side.

The landing platform boomed behind them as Innyria, Namol, and Chemorix landed next to the *Marathon*. The three gang leaders came over, and Innyria nodded at the weapons in Eckhart's hands. "So you're going after Dallas, are you? Good. We're coming."

"No, you aren't. You've done enough. I need you to stay here and—"

"Don't even bother arguing with us, Eckhart," Bing interrupted. "You aren't going over there alone."

"Dallas means as much to us as he does to you," Innyria added. "He's part of our crew. We're going to get him."

"Are you taking that ship?" Thagmor nodded toward the *Marathon*. "I'm glad we fitted it with Destrine drive."

"We won't need it. We're landing on the Stormbreaker. It won't attack as long as we don't attack first." Ingai turned around and grinned at Eckhart. "You might have to go, but no one ever said you had to go alone."

Eckhart looked around at his friends. He counted every one of these men his friends, but this sealed it for all time. They'd stood

with him through war and death and defeat. How fitting that they should stay with him all the way until the end.

The elevator opened, and Rixby came out with Squids, Clifton, and DeWalt. Clifton and DeWalt elbowed into the group and started helping themselves to the weapons locker. Bing moved out of their way to give them space.

"I brought schematics from Regiment Stormbreakers," Clifton told Eckhart, "but they probably won't do us much good. I'm sure these jackasses have modified that ship. It's probably unrecognizable inside."

Eckhart started to tell them to stay behind, but Rixby interrupted him. "Our scans can't penetrate the Stormbreaker's hull, so we won't be able to monitor you from outside." She shoved something into Eckhart's hand. "This is a remote control hooked up to the *Marathon*'s regulators. You'll be able to call the ship to you when you're ready to leave. You'll just need to make sure the ship can reach you without crashing into the hull or whatever might be in its way."

Eckhart felt his throat clenching. "Thank you."

She stepped back to take her place next to Squids. "Come back, Eckhart. We need you."

"Aren't you going to tell me not to go? Aren't you going to tell me how misguided and dangerous this is?"

"Nope," she chirped. "Just come back safely and bring Dallas back. You have to go. I understand that."

Eckhart looked around at the rest of the group. They all understood.

"Dallas is alive over there," Ingai added. "He's undamaged."

"How do you know? He said you couldn't connect with him because he isn't organic."

"It isn't him I'm connecting with. It's the Regiment. The Earthlings over there are holding Dallas. They captured him to bring you to them."

Eckhart stiffened. "Then I'd better go get him."

He shut the weapons locker. Bing, Clifton, DeWalt, Innyria, Chemorix, Namol, Thagmor, and Ingai turned with him on their way back to the *Marathon*.

Eckhart put the remote control in his pocket and faced Rixby and Squids one more time. "Keep this place for me. I need to know you'll still be here when I come back."

“We will be,” Squids replied. “You don’t have to worry about us.”

Eckhart gripped Squid’s shoulder and then hugged Rixby. “Thank you. I’ll see you soon.”

His journey led through the Stormbreaker, but it didn’t end there. The Stormbreaker was just another speed bump on the way to something beyond it. He had to get past the Stormbreaker to find out what that was.

He set off for the *Marathon* and put the *Atera*, the fleet, and the whole campaign out of his mind. He didn’t worry about them anymore. They’d all be here when he came back…and he *would* come back.

He knew that now.

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ENVOY

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1

The massive Stormbreaker towered over the *Marathon* and blocked out the stars. The *Marathon* inched closer, and a tense silence fell over the bridge. Adam Eckhart steered along the giant warship's hulking sides.

"There has to be a way in," Arick Bing murmured from the navigation station. "I don't see anything, though."

"Did you see anything in your visions?" Thagmor asked from Eckhart's elbow.

"I didn't use an entrance then," Eckhart replied. "I just flew straight through the sides."

"Don't do that now," Bing told him.

Eckhart laughed. "I wasn't planning to, pal, but thanks for the suggestion."

"I found something!" Coleman DeWalt called from the workstation at Eckhart's right. "There's a hangar bay about five stories up from here."

Eckhart fired the *Marathon*'s engines and floated up to the coordinates DeWalt sent to the regulators. Sure enough, the *Marathon* drifted into an enormous cavern jutting into the Stormbreaker's side. The impenetrable walls cut inward, and left a huge open deck lined with much smaller ships.

"It's completely deserted," DeWalt reported. "There are no Earthling life signs here."

"There's an EM field pressurizing the deck," Bing added. "We should be able to get out here."

"That's good enough for me." Eckhart pulled the helm into the hangar. A sizzle of sparks ran along the *Marathon*'s hull when the ship passed through the field.

"We're in," DeWalt told Eckhart. "And we're surrounded by an oxygen atmosphere."

Thagmor turned away. "Let's go."

Eckhart set the *Marathon* down, and the crew assembled in the lower cargo hold. Thagmor loaded three different guns with his six arms, while Innyria, Chemorix, and Namol prepared and checked their pounders.

DeWalt and Blake Clifton joined them, and Bing started loading his own guns. Only one person didn't touch a weapon. Ingai, the Ihi leader that had accompanied Eckhart, Dallas, and Thagmor from Gruna, stood apart and smiled at everyone.

Eckhart opened the rear hatch, and the friends gazed out at the Stormbreaker's interior.

A prickle went up Eckhart's scalp now that he was finally here. He'd been having nightmares about this place for weeks. Now that he was actually aboard this ship, it turned out to be the biggest anticlimax of his life.

He and his friends advanced onto the deck. Nothing happened. No one came out to attack them. The whole place was deserted.

"Are you sure about this?" he murmured to DeWalt.

"I scanned the Stormbreaker right before we left the bridge. There are at least five hundred people on this ship."

"So where are they?" Clifton asked. "They must realize we're hostile to them."

"I'm picking up their thoughts," Ingai added. "Most of them don't even know we exist."

"And the ones that do?" Thagmor asked. "Are they arming against us?"

"No, they aren't." Ingai frowned to himself, and then his expression cleared. "They're just waiting for us."

"Where?" Eckhart asked. "Where are they?"

"I'm not sure." Ingai scowled again and then shrugged. "They're using some kind of shielding that blocks me from reading their thoughts."

"That shouldn't be possible," Eckhart argued. "You picked them up just fine when we were on the *Atera*. You told me they were keeping Dallas alive to lure me here."

"They just started doing it. They aren't blocking me from finding out how many of them are on board, for instance."

Eckhart waved that away. "It doesn't matter. Let's go. If they're waiting for us, we'd better oblige them."

The whole party got their weapons into position, and Eckhart headed across the deck. Every footstep resounded through the Stormbreaker with a loud thud. The whole place echoed as hollow as the grave.

Thinking that gave Eckhart another shiver. His destiny was waiting for him somewhere on this ship. *He* was waiting for himself

somewhere on this ship.

He couldn't decide if he wanted to see it or not, but he had no choice. He'd come too far to back out now. Besides, Dallas was somewhere on this ship, too. Eckhart didn't care as much about his own destiny as he cared about freeing Dallas.

He passed Banshees parked on the deck, and a few Volts. Thagmor and Innyria swung their weapons behind each ship to make sure no one was waiting to ambush the party. Chemorix and Namol did the same thing on their side, but no one came out.

The silence was starting to unnerve Eckhart even more than an all-out attack. Every passing second made that attack more inevitable. He wanted to hurry up and find out what the United Collateral Regiment would throw at him next.

The party made it all the way across the deck to the far wall. Eckhart turned back and scanned the whole expanse. The *Marathon* sat there waiting for him. It looked especially tiny compared to this vast Stormbreaker.

The crew spread out. "Over here!" Innyria called.

He opened a door leading to a wide terrace on the other side. Eckhart stepped through with his friends around him.

They emerged on a high platform over a seemingly bottomless chasm dropping through the Stormbreaker's center. Scaffolds, walkways, and more platforms surrounded it in a ring so huge Eckhart could hardly see the other side.

"This is it," he murmured. "The Regiment's experimental assets are here. This is where they were practicing. If they attack us at all, it'll be here."

A shrill screech interrupted his last word as a man rocketed up from the chasm's very bottom. The guy vaulted through space and whizzed in front of Eckhart's eyes.

Thagmor let out a deafening roar and turned all his weapons on the man. He opened fire, and the rest of the crew joined in a second later, but all their shots vanished into an invisible vacuum surrounding the asset.

The man floated to a stop level with Eckhart.

Eckhart's blood ran cold when he looked into a perfect replica of his own face.

Thagmor bombarded the asset with hundreds of shots, but the others hesitated when they saw who it was. Everything about the asset matched Eckhart in a perfect copy—all except the expression

on his face.

He grinned down at Eckhart with so much murderous hatred that Eckhart automatically raised his weapon to shoot the bastard down.

He never got a chance. The asset fired back at them, but even that made the friends hesitate. Instead of shooting any recognizable weapon, the vacuous emptiness around the asset disgorged all the fire the friends had just shot at him.

Datrium jets and strands of Destrine ejected from a transparent blur around the asset. The Datrium smashed into the terrace at Eckhart's feet. Concrete and debris flew into his face before he dove away to save himself.

Thagmor planted himself in the middle of the terrace, hammering the asset with gunfire, but all the Destrine he fired at the man only deflected back at him.

The three gang leaders spread down the terrace, but the asset did the same thing with all their Datrium. He ricocheted it back on the friends until he pounded the terrace to smithereens.

"Catch him, Ingai!" Thagmor roared. "Use your Destrine!"

Ingai responded instantly. He thrust both his hands at the asset and long, thin strands of blue plasma snaked from his fingertips. Translucent blue vapors spilled from his eyes, his mouth, and even from his skin.

Ingai's Destrine coiled across the chasm and surrounded the asset. They bound him in a glimmering ball of plasma. The guy kept firing Datrium from the gang leaders' weapons, but those shots rocketed around inside the ball. They didn't come out to threaten the friends.

Ingai held the asset in place, and the guy writhed inside his prison. He thrashed, and even beat the ball with his fists.

Ingai started to contract the ball and make it smaller, but before anyone could move, six more assets zoomed out of nowhere. They started bombarding the ball with millions of shots. Eckhart couldn't even tell anymore what kind of energy they were using.

Nothing penetrated Ingai's plasma. Thagmor kept slamming dozens of shots into the ball, and they all pierced its outer rim to strike the man inside. Ingai squeezed it tighter, and an otherworldly scream came from inside as the asset got crushed under the pressure.

The other assets saw, and turned their assault on Ingai instead.

He couldn't defend himself with all his plasma wrapped around that one man.

Ground-shaking bombardments struck the terrace directly between Thagmor and Ingai. The whole structure started to cave in.

Ingai released his bubble and Thagmor charged him, but it was too late. The floor imploded. Eckhart dove for the three gang leaders. "Get out of the way!"

He tackled Namol to the ground as the floor dropped into the abyss. The pavement buckled under Eckhart's legs. He barely scrambled onto his hands and knees in time to crawl out of danger.

He staggered clear of the crumbling structure, but Innyria got caught in the undertow. He clawed at the buckling floor, trying to save himself. Eckhart dove for him and grabbed Innyria's collar, but the place was going down so fast it threatened to pull them both over the side.

Bing and Namol charged over and seized Eckhart's belt. They hauled him and Innyria onto solid ground, but they couldn't stay here, either.

The assets demolished the floor closer and closer. Eckhart shoved Namol backward. "Run! Get clear!"

The three gang leaders took off running, and a second later, they overtook Clifton, DeWalt, and Bing.

Eckhart cast a backward glance at the crater where Thagmor and Ingai used to be. He didn't see his two friends anywhere. He turned away, feeling sick. Ingai was the only member of their party with the power to fight these assets. Now he was gone.

Innyria dodged into another hollow farther up the terrace. The crew ducked behind a wall, but the assets kept bombing the place to kingdom come.

"Why didn't they kill us when they had the chance?" Namol growled. "They could have finished us all."

"What are you talking about?" Clifton hollered back. "They almost dropped Eckhart and Innyria down that hole."

"They don't want to kill us," Eckhart replied. "Not me, at least."

"You're crazy!"

"Ingai said it before, and it's true. The Regiment went to a lot of trouble to get me on this ship. They don't want to kill me."

"That doesn't help the rest of us, does it?" Bing peeked outside. "They're stopping."

"We need to split up," Chemorix suggested. "If they want to

keep you alive, we can lead the assets away from you. You can find whatever it is you came here to find while we keep them occupied."

"They'll kill us all if we do that," Innyria countered. "Eckhart's the only thing keeping the rest of us alive."

Bing tiptoed to the edge of their protective wall. "The assets are leaving."

Eckhart followed him. Bing was right. The assets were flying away to another part of the chasm, but they didn't leave completely.

"We have to find the lab," Eckhart began. "Maybe we'll find a way to defeat these assets."

"How do we find the lab?" DeWalt asked

Eckhart took a few more steps onto the open terrace. Every level looked the same to him. The crew had run a long way from their original spot; he could even see the shattered place where Thagmor and Ingai disappeared.

Not even that distinguished one level from another. How was he supposed to find his way around this enormous ship?

Clifton came to his side and pulled out a small device. He held it up where Eckhart could see it. "This is the Stormbreaker floor plan I took from the Regiment records. Let's see if there's anything on it that we can use."

Eckhart looked down at it, but he didn't recognize what he was seeing. Hundreds of floorplans ran past his eyes as Clifton scrolled through them.

Clifton pointed at one of them. "There. That one is a science lab. The records say it's a food safety lab."

"Is that the only lab on board?" Bing craned his neck to look over the side. "I find that hard to believe."

"These decks here are crew quarters and family apartments. I'm guessing we won't find the lab there," Clifton replied.

"The assets must live there," DeWalt pointed out.

"But the assets aren't there," Bing argued. "They're here."

"Where's the bridge?" Eckhart asked.

Clifton scrolled to a different part of the layout. "Here."

Eckhart studied the picture in front of him. "There's an elevator over there."

"You aren't really taking the elevator, are you?" Innyria asked.

Eckhart had to laugh. "I guess not."

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2

Eckhart stepped out of the stairwell, crossed another terrace, and walked onto the Stormbreaker's bridge. Uniformed Regiment crewmen worked at every station. Four officers stood on an elevated upper stage behind all the workstations. The officers could look straight down at what their crewmen were doing.

They called orders down to their people, and the crewmen answered, but Eckhart couldn't stop staring at all of them. Every one was a copy of himself.

He crept along the stage, experiencing the most surreal mental confusion of his life. Every face he looked at was himself. The officers spoke in his voice. The crewmen answered in his voice. Their movements and facial expressions matched his exactly.

He eased down the stage, studying each man in detail, but he couldn't see any flaw in them. He even raised his hand to poke one of them, just to make sure it was all real, but he stopped himself in time.

As soon as he made it past the first officer, Namol and Innyria walked onto the bridge behind Eckhart. The officers and crew completely ignored him. They acted like he wasn't there, but they noticed the two aliens right away.

A major spun around and accosted Innyria. "What the hell are you doing here? How did you get on this ship?"

Eckhart never knew afterward what prompted him to say what he did. The words seemed to come from somewhere beyond him. "They're with me."

The major shot Eckhart a fierce glare, but his expression cleared as soon as he recognized another copy of himself.

The major straightened up, squared his shoulders, and nodded. "Of course, sir. My apologies." He turned back to his work, and the atmosphere on the bridge returned to its previously settled air.

Innyria and Namol sidestepped over to Eckhart. They made room for Bing, Clifton, DeWalt, and Chemorix to join them, but the officers pretended not to see them.

"What the hell is going on?" Namol whispered. "Why is everyone here you?"

“I don’t know, but I’m gonna find out.” Eckhart watched the activity on the bridge for a minute, and then left. This place wasn’t telling him anything he didn’t already know.

They returned to a terrace outside the bridge. It opened onto a tier at the very top of the chasm. Instead of giving him a bird’s eye view of anything, it only made the levels and tiers look farther away.

“That was a total waste of time,” Clifton grumbled.

“What’s your next suggestion?” Bing asked.

“I don’t have one. We’re all blind on this ship.”

“We can’t exactly search the ship room by room,” Eckhart replied.

“I have an idea,” Bing chimed in. “We go back to the *Marathon*, fly the ship in here, and start shooting the place up. If we destroy enough of the ship, we’re bound to hit the lab eventually.”

“Quit talking smack,” Clifton countered. “We wouldn’t get one shot off before the assets attacked us. Then we wouldn’t have a ship to leave in when we finally figured out how to destroy this Stormbreaker.”

Bing only grinned at him. “It’s just an idea.”

“Give me the chart.” Eckhart held out his hand for Clifton’s device, and Clifton handed it over.

Namol went over to the tier railing and looked out over the expanse while Eckhart studied the ship’s layout, but it still didn’t tell him anything.

“The assets are leaving,” Namol announced. “They’re flying away from the chasm.”

Eckhart looked up. “What are they doing?”

“They’re going into another chamber…over there.” Namol pointed, and everyone went to his side to look.

He was right. The assets soared through space, drifting downward from where they’d attacked Thagmor and Ingai.

They hovered in the air while one of them landed on the walkway. He went into some random room, and then each of the others did the same thing.

“Let’s go.” Eckhart strode away toward the stairs.

Namol hustled up next to him, checking his weapon. “They’re five levels down and directly across from us.”

Eckhart dropped into the stairway and emerged in the same spot, five floors below where he started. The crew set off around the

chasm. The last two assets stayed outside and then vanished into the room…or whatever it was.

Eckhart tightened his grip on his weapon. What were the assets doing in there? It must be important if they all went into the same place. Maybe they were receiving orders from whoever commanded this ship.

The last two entered, but disappeared from view before he got there. He approached the door and flattened his back to the wall while his friends got into position.

The three gang leaders trained their weapons at the closed door from several feet away. Bing and DeWalt took the other side of the door, while Clifton flanked Eckhart.

Eckhart nodded to his friends and eased the door latch down. He swung it open, but he didn't show himself.

Innyria squinted across the threshold. Eckhart couldn't read his expression about what might be inside.

Innyria took a few steps forward. Chemorix and Namol accompanied him as they approached the door.

He finally nodded to Eckhart. Eckhart jerked around the door, aiming his weapon into the room, but there was nothing there. It was completely empty of everything, including furniture.

Eckhart eased into the room, sweeping his gun back and forth. Where were the assets? He looked for another way out of the room. Where had they gone?

He took a few more steps. Bing and the two Earthlings stood aside while the gang leaders came closer to follow Eckhart inside.

He reached the center of the room. He didn't see anything but bare, blank walls surrounding him.

He started to turn back when a catastrophic explosion smashed into the terrace outside. The concussion blasted into the door, and a powerful burst of compressed air smacked Eckhart off his feet.

He hit the wall, fell flat on the floor, and struggled upright, trying to see through the cloud of dust. Plaster and broken masonry twirled in the mayhem.

Gunshots erupted outside, but he couldn't see who was shooting at who. Someone yelled out there—DeWalt. The sound set Eckhart off, and he dove into the confusion.

He exited the dust cloud on the shattered remains of the terrace outside. He glanced left in time to see Innyria, Bing, and Clifton racing away down the tier. They exchanged shots with three assets

hovering in the center of the chasm.

More gunfire echoed from Eckhart's right, but he didn't see the others. He fired across the expanse and then bolted after his friends.

His first shot vanished inside one of the asset's fields. Eckhart still couldn't see anything suspending them in midair. He was too used to seeing DeWalt and Akkek Stratha with their blinding halos.

The minute he showed himself, the three assets attacked in a fury. Two of them rocketed toward the three friends up ahead, and the last one hurtled straight for Eckhart. He wheeled around and squeezed off three good shots, but he already knew they wouldn't do anything. The next instant, the asset collided with Eckhart in an unholy blast of energy.

Eckhart braced himself to slam into the wall behind him, but the asset flew straight through it. They streaked through several walls and more rooms. People, electronics, and living quarters flashed past Eckhart's eyes so fast he didn't have a chance to look around.

The asset burst through into another chasm. They hung suspended over the vast open space, and then started to plunge.

Eckhart finally managed to haul his awareness back to the man holding him. His own face stared back at him, but it looked nothing like himself.

The asset grinned at him in something like maniacal glee. The wicked flash in this man's eyes told Eckhart loud and clear that this wasn't him. It was someone else—someone beyond human.

The next instant, they slammed into a solid steel floor at the chasm's very bottom. The whole towering edifice of tiers, platforms, and levels receded out of sight above Eckhart's head.

The asset reared off him and raised his fist to pummel Eckhart into next week. Eckhart snapped wide awake and reacted in a heartbeat.

He yanked his head out of the way, and the asset's fist punched up to the wrist in the concrete next to Eckhart's ear. The asset straightened up for another blow, and Eckhart snapped.

He lunged for the guy and caught his enemy by the neck. His fingers closed on living Earthling flesh. Whatever this guy was in the chasm, he was just an ordinary guy down here.

Eckhart didn't give himself a second to think about it. This was an Earthing. That meant he could be killed.

Eckhart rocketed off the floor and managed to tear the guy off him before the asset responded. The guy struggled, and stopped

Eckhart from getting any further than a sitting position.

They yanked each other right and left a few times, but that wasn't getting Eckhart anywhere. He jerked the asset sideways, and they both hit the ground.

Something flashed down near Eckhart's stomach, and a gut-wrenching sucker punch nailed him. The asset couldn't have hit him, because the man still grappled with him. Both his hands rested on Eckhart's shoulders, but that strike knocked the wind out of Eckhart, and he buckled.

He barely managed to keep his grip on the guy's neck as one blow after another assaulted his body. He glanced down to see flashes going off between the asset's stomach and his own body.

A mind-blowing slam hit him under the chin. His head snapped back and he saw stars. The next second, the asset toppled him and pinned him.

All thought that the asset was a normal Earthling vanished out of Eckhart's head. The asset's hands didn't move from Eckhart's shoulders as blow after blow rained all over his body and face and head.

The guy's features twisted in a mask of sadistic pleasure, watching Eckhart writhe under the attack. Eckhart reeled, trying to get his brain working, but the explosions bursting in his eyes and skull clouded his judgment. He could hardly see the asset anymore.

Without warning, a white-hot knife stabbed into his guts. He froze in cold-blooded horror, feeling his insides drilled to the core.

The asset laughed in his face, and it was Eckhart's own laugh. Eckhart's dazed eyes floated down to his stomach, but there was nothing there.

The light flashing between himself and the asset blinked again as the asset climbed off him, leaving him groaning and gagging on the ground.

Eckhart rolled onto one shoulder, hugging his arms across his stomach. Every particle of his being ached. He felt his life's blood pouring from the wound and draining every ounce of his strength.

He toppled and fell on his face while the asset stood to one side, chuckling at him. Eckhart finally floundered onto his knees. He had to concentrate hard to focus his eyes.

He pushed himself to his feet with one hand, but when he looked down at his own body, there was no wound, no blood, nothing.

He gulped down panic. He turned, and the asset smirked at him. “You want another one? Come on.”

Eckhart blinked at the guy in blank horror. He couldn’t be facing off against himself. This man had powers Eckhart didn’t even know about. This was just the beginning. The next stab might be a real one.

The asset didn’t give him time to regroup. He streaked so fast he blurred in the air as he smashed into Eckhart and they both crashed into the wall behind. The asset drove him into the concrete with unbelievable power.

Another storm of blows hammered Eckhart all over. He had to do something. He couldn’t wait for the guy to stab him again.

That thought set Eckhart off, and he switched into some furious silence beyond thought. He’d experienced this once before when he’d fought and defeated Phrolain for dominance over the Vrali society.

Eckhart lunged out of the wall and hooked his foot around the asset’s leg. He yanked it free, but the asset didn’t fall. His feet left the ground, but he stayed at the same level. He floated, still grappling with Eckhart.

Eckhart didn’t hesitate a second time. He nailed his elbow into the asset’s face, and the asset drifted another foot back. He followed up again and again. He punched the asset in the nose, grabbed him by the back of the neck, and drove the asset’s face down into his own knee.

The asset buckled, but he still didn’t fall. Eckhart’s fury erupted out of all bounds, and he took full advantage of the asset’s powers. He seized the asset’s head and swung him with all his might.

The asset’s mysterious powers made him weightless in Eckhart’s hands. He slammed the man into the wall where the asset had just pinned him, and attacked in a blood frenzy.

He scooped up a piece of broken masonry from the floor and spiked it down into the asset’s head. No blood spurted from the wound. The sharp edge gashed down the man’s face, and beaming light poured from the cut.

That one sight sent Eckhart over the edge. This wasn’t a man. It was some freak cooked up in a Regiment lab. This creature didn’t deserve Eckhart’s mercy.

He dragged the asset by the head into the open floor. The guy stumbled on his legs like a regular man, but Eckhart was too far

gone to care.

He spun the asset around and took a running sprint for the wall. He smashed the asset headfirst into the concrete and let the body fall.

The asset flopped on his face, but Eckhart wasn't done by a long way. He kicked the man onto his back, dropped down on his knees to straddle the guy's chest, and yanked out his sidearm.

He aimed it into the guy's face. "Who the hell are you?" Eckhart bellowed. "Tell me who you are!"

The asset blinked up at him through eyes already starting to swell shut. The whole top of his head bubbled and puffed into some kind of monstrosity out of the deepest, darkest fringes.

The guy tried to grin, but ended up coughing. "Who are you?" Eckhart thundered. "Tell me who you are now!"

The guy coughed again, and blood bubbled from his mouth. Eckhart shook him. Adrenaline and panic consumed his insides. He couldn't let this thing die without giving up his secrets.

"Who are you?" Eckhart roared again. "What is your name?"

The guy fought himself under control and started mouthing something. He struggled to make himself heard while his lips formed silent words.

Eckhart leaned closer. "Who are you?" he murmured. "What's your name?"

The guy choked again and finally whispered, "Lan…Lan… Landau."

Eckhart stared down into the guy's eyes. His brain shut down, taking in everything the guy was saying. The guy had a strange accent he couldn't place.

"Landau," the guy whispered again. "Hal…Landau. I was born… I was born in…Darwin…"

Landau's eyes drifted away from Eckhart's face, and then all his features went slack. He stopped breathing. He was dead.

Eckhart stumbled away from the body, still aiming his sidearm at the thing like he could somehow stop those words from penetrating his brain.

This man…he wasn't Eckhart at all. This man had a different name. He was from some place Eckhart had never even heard of.

So how did Landau become such a perfect copy of him?

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3

Eckhart took a step back and stumbled on a broken stone. He whipped around, struggling to catch his balance.

When he finally steadied himself, he wasn't aiming his sidearm at Landau anymore. The wrecked body lay on the floor, not moving.

Eckhart looked around in a daze. He'd survived a fight against one of those things, but that hardly helped him. Finding out that these assets weren't him only raised more questions than it answered.

He fought his brain under control, and when he eventually managed to make yet another dazed survey of the area, he realized where he was.

A vertical shaft rose above his head. He couldn't even see the Stormbreaker's interior chasm from here. He groped the walls, but there was no way out of here—no door, no stairs, nothing. An asset could have flown out, but he wasn't one of the assets. He was just plain old Eckhart.

He holstered his sidearm and circled the shaft again, palming the walls for the smallest toehold. Nothing.

He stepped back into the center and gazed up at the light shining down from above. What was the point of getting onto the Stormbreaker if he was trapped down here?

A few flashes blinked far overhead. Were his friends in battle against the other assets? He had to get out of here.

He started to get desperate when he made it to the other side of the shaft. He came to the shattered wall section where Landau had slammed him into the concrete.

He almost turned away before he noticed a lattice of steel support framing inside the wall. Eckhart thrust his arm in, and his heart soared when he felt an open place.

He tore rubble out of the way and wedged his body into the gap. He had to pinch himself into a tiny cylinder of space between the framing struts, but at least he saw how he could get out of the shaft.

He started climbing up the scaffold inside the wall, which turned out to be a damn sight harder than he'd realized. The narrow tube didn't have enough space for him to bend his knees. Every step

became a torture, but he had to keep going.

He didn't know how long he'd have to keep climbing. He might crawl all the way back out into space and destroy himself in the vacuum.

He was just thinking about stopping for a while to rest his exhausted limbs when he came to another opening. A foot-wide square gap gave him a view through a ventilation grate into another chamber beyond. It wasn't part of the chasm, or any other part of the Stormbreaker that Eckhart had seen before.

He leaned closer and squinted through the grate fins. The hall beyond looked almost as big as the chasm itself—or as much of it as Eckhart could see.

He forced his head and shoulders all the way against the fins, pressed his eyes to the grate, and held his breath. Hundreds of assets whizzed around, fighting and practicing their mysterious powers.

Explosions ruptured in all directions. People whizzed back and forth across Eckhart's line of sight so fast that he couldn't keep up with them all. Lightning, lasers, and blistering jets of fire and plasma rocketed in all directions, hit other people, and recoiled back on the attackers.

Eckhart got distracted by the display of so many otherworldly powers, but after a few minutes of watching the assets practice, his mind cleared enough to recognize the truth.

Everyone in the huge chamber was a copy of himself, but they weren't all his age. Some were much younger, and a few even looked like teenaged versions of him.

His skin crawled, and then that creeping sense of horror transformed to stone-cold fury. The Regiment had bred all these assets in secret. The Regiment—or this remnant of it—they must be planning to deploy these assets against the alien fringes.

Or maybe the Regiment planned to deploy the assets against anyone who tried to rid the fringes of their obnoxious presence. Whatever the Regiment wanted to do with these people couldn't be good.

Eckhart's brain flipped. He'd come over to this ship to stop the Regiment once and for all. He might not be able to blow up the whole Stormbreaker, but he could damn well put a dent in their plans.

He glanced right and left. The hole in which he crouched opened

directly into the hall where the assets practiced. He couldn't go in there without showing himself; they'd kill him for sure if they spotted him. He'd have to come up with another way.

He backtracked and started climbing again, but his anger gave him new energy. He didn't understand what Landau's confession meant, but Eckhart knew one thing. The Regiment had done something to him—to Eckhart himself.

They'd used him to make these assets. They must have. No other explanation made sense. He was involved in this somehow, and he had to stop it.

This must be the hidden message from his nightmares. He himself was the cornerstone of the Regiment's whole rotten plan. They hadn't asked him before they did it, so it was up to him to stop them.

He climbed for a long, long time, but he only got angrier and more determined the farther he went. To hell with them—the bastards! He didn't know how he would pay them back for doing this to him, but he would find a way.

He finally climbed all the way to the top. The narrow cylinder ended at a solid concrete roof. He couldn't go any further, but when he looked around, he spotted another ventilation grate.

This one opened into another control room like the bridge. Copies of himself worked over the electronics.

He made his decision and crawled to the grate. He slammed his hand against it and snapped it out of place before he lowered himself to the floor.

Everyone present turned around to stare at him while he got to his feet, dusted off his clothes, and faced these people.

He shrugged, trying to decide what to say to them. He finally blurted out, "As you were," and bolted.

He walked out onto another tier overlooking the chasm. He didn't see his friends or the other assets anywhere, but that didn't concern him.

Climbing up that scaffold had given him plenty of time to mentally rehearse exactly what he would do once he got out of it. He strode back to the stairs, glancing everywhere for anyone coming around to attack him, but no one came.

He jogged down to the level where he'd seen the assets practicing. He followed the route he thought would take him back to the hall.

He checked every door, but most only led to empty rooms or civilian quarters with people who didn't look anything like Eckhart. Earthling women, children, and even a few old people went about their business, and none of them looked strangely at Eckhart at all. They all seemed to recognize him, and a few even smiled at him.

He kept going until he was certain he was near the assets' practice hall. It had to be here somewhere.

He approached another door and turned the knob, but he froze when he heard explosions going off inside it. This was it. His scalp prickled. What should he do once he got inside?

He couldn't go in there without a weapon—and then he had a devilishly brilliant idea.

He returned to the next compartment, which was another residential apartment. Three women, four children, and an old lady sat around the dining table talking, while one of the women instructed the children in something or other.

She looked up, and split in a huge grin when Eckhart walked in, but her expression changed as soon as he started talking.

"You all need to evacuate the Stormbreaker immediately." Eckhart thought fast. "The order just came down from Admiral Thiel. You all need to go up to the hangar, take the Banshees, and get off the Stormbreaker as soon as possible. Hurry!"

The women tried to protest, but he herded them out of the apartment. "Spread the word to the rest of the civilians! Everyone has to get off the Stormbreaker. It's an emergency! The ship suffered a critical overload. There isn't a moment to lose."

That got them moving. They raced away, and a moment later, he heard more female and child voices calling, and even crying out, on the terrace.

Eckhart turned back to the reason he'd come in here in the first place. A small kitchen unit covered one wall of the apartment. That was the wall adjacent to the asset's practice hall.

The family had been heating something in a kettle on a small Datrium flame. He pulled open the cabinet under the sink, and his heart flipped. A conduit led into the wall and bent upward toward the burner plate. That had to be the Datrium delivery system.

He squatted down and took hold of the conduit. He yanked at it, but it wouldn't give. But he couldn't walk away from an opportunity like this. He'd never find another weapon powerful enough to fight the assets.

He wrenched and struggled, but the conduit was too strong. He floundered around for an alternative, then stood up and searched the apartment.

A kitchen knife rested on the counter next to the sink, but he discarded that notion. That wouldn't get him anywhere.

His mind immediately switched to the pounder he'd dropped when Landau attacked him. Eckhart would give anything for a weapon that big now.

Then he remembered. He *did* have a weapon. It wasn't as big as a pounder, but maybe it would work just as well.

He propped open the cabinet door, retreated all the way to the farthest wall, and knelt down on the floor. He took a deep, steadying breath, pulled his sidearm, and hunkered down to take shelter under his arm. This would probably get him killed quicker than anything, but at least he could take out the assets at the same time.

He sighted down the barrel, aimed for the conduit, and squeezed. The gun went off.

He didn't have time to take shelter under his arm before the conduit exploded in a bone-shattering boom.

The concussion punched Eckhart back against the wall as the whole kitchen vaporized in fire. Another explosion pounded his whole body as the wall connecting to the assets' practice hall went up in smoke and combusting plasma.

Eckhart rocketed to his feet. He had to act without hesitation, and he took a running charge straight into the fire. He extended his arms and dove through the shattered wall. A scorching jet of flame blistered him from his face all the way down his side as he sailed past the combusting Datrium jet.

The plasma fountained into the hall, burning in a thunderous torch of flame. He winced, but he kept his eyes open just long enough to grab the conduit and yank it into the hall.

He plowed through to find the place in chaos. The assets still flew around everywhere, but the explosion had distracted them from targeting each other. They all turned toward the blast, and some of the younger ones even drifted toward the ground.

He somersaulted across the floor, still gripping the blistering hot conduit. He flopped down on his back, summoned the last of his energy, and aimed the plasma torch at the assets.

They saw him, and at least some of them recognized him. They

flew at him in a pelting throng of spurting lasers and erupting power, but he held firm. He brandished his plasma torch in front of him and aimed it at anyone who even looked at him.

He staggered to his feet to defend himself when one of the assets' lasers hit the torch. A catastrophic blast detonated from it, and an ear-splitting boom echoed back on the asset that fired the laser. The plasma fire touched the invisible field surrounding him and set off an even bigger shockwave. It billowed bigger and bigger until it spread through the whole hall.

Screams rent the air, and racing assets whizzed everywhere. Eckhart couldn't think fast enough to see whether they were coming after him or trying to save themselves.

In the middle of all that mayhem, he heard another sound drifting from somewhere out of sight. It vibrated the floor and trembled the walls and ceiling.

Some of the assets noticed it, too. The low rumble fell silent, and then shuddered a little louder. The assets stopped what they were doing to listen, and a deep, quaking groan went through the whole ship.

Eckhart rifled his memory to recall the ship layout Clifton had showed him. He tried to remember where the Datrium cistern was located on this ship. That conduit came directly from the cistern. The fire probably fed back to the whole damn structure.

The assets had the same idea at the same moment. Eckhart dropped his torch, shot to his feet, and took off running for the terrace. At that moment, a cataclysmic boom shook the ship.

The blast smashed in the ceiling, and piles of rubble caved in on Eckhart's head. He had a split second to change his strategy, and he didn't have to worry about the torch burning him again.

He sprinted for the ruined cupboard under the sink, but he didn't have time to get inside before the whole hall exploded in a brutal, thunderous boom.

What remained of the ceiling smashed down in one solid plate of concrete. It flattened everything, including Eckhart's legs, still dangling half out of the cupboard.

He screamed in pain as the weight crushed his legs. He tried to pull himself free and get back into the kitchen, but the fallen ceiling pinned him. He couldn't move.

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4

Eckhart let his forehead collapse on his forearms. He gasped in pain, and his consciousness started to fade out. He couldn't feel his legs anymore, but the rest of him screamed. He couldn't even turn himself around enough to see how bad the damage was or how to get out of here.

He shuddered, struggling not to succumb to despair. He'd succeeded. He killed all the assets in that chamber. Now what the hell was he going to do? He would die here if he didn't think of something pretty quick.

He couldn't see anything but that part of the apartment beyond the open cupboard door. But he couldn't call for help or even summon the energy to struggle.

He shut his eyes, but that only made him feel more like he might pass out. He had to do something.

He pried himself around, and almost really did pass out. He couldn't see his legs under the solid mass of concrete resting on top of them.

He forced himself to take a few steadying breaths. He'd gotten himself out of worse situations than this, hadn't he? He just couldn't think what they might be right now.

Eckhart twisted around in his tiny cubical prison. The blast had pinned the plasma conduit inside the hall. He couldn't reach it from here.

He slowed his breathing even more…and heard it. Gunfire popped in the distance, but it wasn't distant. It was coming closer.

The sound set him off like a rocket. He jerked and yanked at his own body. He shoved his arms against the kitchen cupboards on either side. Maybe he could force them out or break them somehow. Then what?

The fight escalated to a deafening concussion right outside the apartment. His adrenaline started pumping. Whoever was fighting out there must be right outside the door.

He grabbed the sink drainpipe and heaved with all his might, but his position didn't help him gain any leverage.

Plasma rocketed into the apartment and hit the table. It burst

into a cloud of matchsticks, and Eckhart panicked. The assets were coming to finish him off. They had to be.

He groped for his sidearm before he remembered that he'd dropped it during this misguided project. He attacked the cupboard's side walls again, but a second later, he heard indistinct bellowing.

He froze, straining his ears. He knew that voice.

The next minute, Thagmor staggered backward into the apartment. He planted himself among the destroyed remains of the table—right in front of Eckhart.

Eckhart stared at his friend in stunned shock. He hardly dared to believe that Thagmor was here.

Thagmor fired all three of his guns at someone out of sight. "Come on!" he roared. "Let's go!"

Eckhart opened his mouth to call out when Ingai's face darted between Eckhart and Thagmor. Ingai ducked as another volley of lasers, plasma, and God only knew what else detonated in the apartment beyond.

Shots struck Thagmor, and he went ballistic. He roared so loudly that he frightened even Eckhart.

"Eckhart!" Ingai squeaked, and then cringed as another bombardment smashed into the kitchen counter.

"What are you—how did you—?" Eckhart stammered.

"No time!" Ingai had to duck again as the battle inside the apartment built to an epic pitch. "Hold onto me!"

Ingai stretched both arms inside the cupboard. He grasped both of Eckhart's wrists, but Eckhart still didn't see how Ingai would be able to get him out of here.

"Now!" Thagmor roared. "Do it now!"

"I'm trying!" Ingai shrieked. "Hold on, Eckhart!"

Eckhart gritted his teeth for the moment his destroyed legs tore away from his body, but at that moment, Ingai's eyes started glowing bright blue. Streams of Destrine swirled out of his eyes, and Ingai opened his mouth to disgorge more plasma tendrils. They threaded into the cupboard, past Eckhart, and a rush of warmth surrounded his lower body.

Mind-destroying pain flooded down Eckhart's legs as the ceiling lifted off him, but he still couldn't move.

"Hold on, Eckhart!" Ingai yelled again, but Eckhart couldn't breathe. Pain threatened to wipe him out completely, but it only got

worse when Ingai gave a tremendous heave and hauled him out of the cupboard.

Thagmor stood his ground, fighting off a bunch of assets. Eckhart didn't see how many, and he didn't care. He sobbed in pain as Ingai dropped his pulverized body on the floor. Destrine surrounded him, but he couldn't think with all this pain coursing through him.

Ingai's Destrine tendrils floated Eckhart off the floor. He saw himself hovering in front of Ingai while lasers and plasma bursts flashed all around them.

Ingai turned Eckhart toward Thagmor, and him saw that the whole front wall of the apartment had been blasted out. Thagmor alone protected Ingai and Eckhart from what looked like fifteen assets out there.

Eckhart barely got into that position when a torrent of energy rushed into the apartment. It collided with Thagmor and hurtled him off his feet. He crashed into Ingai, caught Eckhart in the same rush of motion, and all three friends crashed into the only wall still standing.

The impact demolished the structure and hurled the three friends through the wall. Eckhart thought for a second that the assets might have attacked Thagmor, but when he got through the wall, he happened to spin backward.

He caught a glimpse through the breach their bodies had just made. The assets were still on the terrace. They'd never entered the apartment at all.

The next second, Thagmor, Ingai, and Eckhart all started to fall. They had erupted into another vast tiered chasm, as big or bigger than the first. The three friends hung suspended miles over open space, but only for a second.

Gravity caught them and they plummeted. Thagmor shot out one of his six arms and grasped for Ingai. "Save me!"

"Hold on!" Ingai shrieked, and grabbed Thagmor's hand. They dropped like stones with Eckhart whizzing along at their sides, but a second later, the Destrine threads binding him unraveled.

They rewound themselves around all three men, and they started to slow. They fell slower and slower, with the gleaming threads weaving a sphere of protection around them.

Ingai breathed a sigh of relief. "We thought we would never find you in time, Eckhart."

“What happened to you?” Eckhart croaked. “I thought you might be dead.”

Thagmor laughed, but it wasn’t his usually gruff, rumbly laugh. His voice trembled. “We almost were, more than once, and then Ingai saw you in danger.”

“Thank you,” Eckhart rasped. “Thank you for coming to get me.”

“We still have to figure out how to get out of this.” Ingai examined the tiers still racing upward too fast. “We should land somewhere.”

“You’re the only one who can do that, my friend,” Thagmor boomed in something closer to his usual voice.

“I don’t think I’ll be much good to you, no matter where you go.” Eckhart glanced down at his legs and gulped down the urge to be sick.

Ingai nodded to a random terrace to one side. “There.”

He migrated closer and set down on the smooth floor. He and Thagmor landed on their feet. Eckhart tried not to groan when Ingai laid him flat on the floor.

His legs crumpled in a sodden, pulpy mess. Eckhart couldn’t look at them again. He could barely stay conscious with this pain driving him out of his mind.

He shut his eyes, but he opened them again when he felt Ingai touching him. Ingai pulled one of Eckhart’s arms straight and started peeling back his sleeve.

Thagmor strode back and forth on the tier, searching everywhere and rechecking his guns. He guarded Ingai while the little Ihi bared Eckhart’s inner elbow. “What are you doing?” Eckhart asked.

Ingai didn’t answer. He pointed at a vein pulsing under Eckhart’s skin. A thin line of plasma slithered between Ingai’s finger and Eckhart’s arm.

Searing pain rushed through Eckhart’s body and he spasmed back on the cold concrete floor. He gritted his teeth and howled in pain as that gnawing fire crawled up his arm and into his chest.

It spread out, chewing up every particle of his being, but when it reached his legs, they exploded in such a colossal torrent of agony that he really did pass out.

He blinked his eyes open and shivered on the floor. He groaned and tried to roll over. His legs still hurt, but he felt right away that they weren’t broken or smashed anymore.

Ingai touched his shoulder. “You can sit up, Eckhart. You’re all right.”

“We shouldn’t stay here,” Thagmor rumbled. “We have to move.”

Eckhart tried to look around. They were still on the terrace where Ingai had set them down. “What happened?”

“I repaired your legs. Now get up. We have to leave.”

Ingai picked him up, and Eckhart wavered for a second. Ingai moved over in front of him and peered up into Eckhart’s eyes. “You’ve seen something—something about the assets.”

Eckhart tried to look away, but he could never hide anything from Ingai. “I fought one of them. He told me his name.”

“Who are they?” Thagmor asked. “Are they you?”

“No, they’re men—individual men. They each have their own name. They aren’t me at all.”

“What a relief,” Thagmor boomed. “I was starting to wonder if I should be killing them at all.”

“You definitely should. I don’t know what the Regiment is doing with them, but they aren’t me. None of these people are.”

“So why are there so many of them?” Ingai asked.

“Have you seen any of the others—Innyria or Bing or DeWalt?” Eckhart asked.

Ingai shook his head. “Not since we got separated.”

“We’ve heard them shooting, though,” Thagmor added. “I’m certain your men are still alive.”

“Can you sense them anywhere, Ingai?” Eckhart asked. “Can you tell where they are in this Stormbreaker?”

“No. The Regiment is still stopping me from sensing anything.”

“But you sensed Eckhart,” Thagmor pointed out. “You told me he was in danger, and you led me right to him.”

Eckhart turned to see how Ingai would answer this, but the little Ihi only shrugged. “I can’t explain it.”

Eckhart scowled at his surroundings. This was definitely a different chasm than the first one. It didn’t show any of the signs of battle damage from the assets’ repeated attacks. “Something weird is happening around here.”

“You can say that again,” Thagmor growled.

“What do we do now, Eckhart?” Ingai asked. “How do we find whatever it is we’re looking for in this ship?”

“I was just about to ask you the same question. I don’t know

anything you don't."

"I say we hunt down the assets and kill as many of them as possible," Thagmor countered. "You had the right idea blowing up the Datrium cistern, Eckhart."

"The assets don't need Datrium," Eckhart told him. "We can't leave this ship intact. We can't leave until we find a way to destroy the whole ship with everyone on it."

Ingai's head whipped sideways, and he gasped out loud.

"What is it?" Eckhart asked. "What do you see?"

"The civilians…they're fleeing en masse! They're launching from the hangar. They're trying to get back to Earth."

"Good," Eckhart replied. "I don't want women and children and old people trapped here when shit goes down."

Ingai shook his head fast. "The aliens are moving in to finish them off. The assets are deploying to stop them."

"Damn it!" Eckhart muttered.

"You can't help them," Thagmor told him. "You have your own mission. You did what you could by sending them away. Now finish the job."

Eckhart pulled himself together. "I have to find the lab. It has to be here somewhere."

"Perhaps you should ask someone," Thagmor suggested.

Eckhart spun around to stare at him. "What?"

"Ask someone. They think you're one of them. They won't recognize that you're a stranger from the fringes who came here to destroy them. Ask them where the lab is."

Eckhart thought fast. Why didn't he think of this before? He could go to the bridge and ask the captain, or the major, whatever he was.

He nodded toward the stairs. They were in the same place in this chasm that they were in the other one. The trio climbed up to the top deck, and Eckhart stopped the other two outside the bridge. "You two should probably stay here."

"Don't worry," Thagmor boomed. "I have no desire to see any more Earthlings as long as I live."

Eckhart grabbed his shoulder. "Me neither. Let's get this over with."

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5

Eckhart stepped onto the bridge. The same major glanced at him and then went straight back to work. No one on the bridge acted like Eckhart being there was anything worth noting.

He migrated over to the stage where the officers observed their staff at work. Eckhart tried to study the readouts in front of them. Everything on their many screens looked the same way Eckhart remembered from his brief stint in the Regiment—but that couldn't be right.

This Stormbreaker didn't travel through space. Once Stormbreakers took up a position, they stayed there. They weren't designed for space travel except to move into their places.

The controls in front of these officers showed flight paths, engine speeds, and a whole bunch of other stuff Eckhart didn't understand. The officers even gave orders to their staff as if the ship was in motion.

Eckhart frowned at the readings and then at the men around him. Were they acting? Were they carrying out some elaborate charade? Why would they do that?

The same major snapped Eckhart out of his thoughts. "Can I help you with something, sir?"

Eckhart cleared his throat. "I'm looking for the lab…the experimental lab."

"Oh, of course." The major tapped a few things in front of him. "Here it is."

He pointed to a spot twenty floors below the bridge. Now that Eckhart saw an accurate floor plan of this Stormbreaker, he recognized the two chasms lined with rooms, compartments, residences, and even more hangars full of ships.

"Is there anything else, sir?" the major asked.

"No, that's it." Eckhart's gaze darted over the floor plan, trying to take in as much of it as he could. It couldn't be as simple as this. He couldn't just waltz downstairs and walk into the lab without encountering some resistance.

"There's an elevator right over there, sir. You can ride down there in a few seconds."

Eckhart glanced toward the elevator the man indicated, and then looked back at the major. Their eyes met, and Eckhart endured another wave of vertigo when he stared into his own face.

This wasn't him. It was someone completely different. This guy had been doctored or modified somehow to make him look like Eckhart. Was that all part of the charade?

Had someone concocted this whole elaborate scenario to mess with Eckhart's head? Why would they do that? He was nothing. He was a gutter rat from Parilia—the lowest, poorest, most lawless planet on the fringes—or just about the lowest.

Alarm bells clanged in his head. This was a trick. This major wasn't just being helpful by suggesting the elevator. Eckhart had to choose between bringing Thagmor and Ingai onto the bridge or going down to the lab alone.

He cleared his throat and realized with another jolt that everyone on the bridge was watching him. "What's your name?" he asked the major.

The major smiled. It was the first genuine smile Eckhart had seen since he'd set foot on this ship.

He stuck out his hand. "Major Ted Rohrbach. Good to meet you."

Eckhart shook Rohrbach's hand numbly. "Adam Eckhart."

His response delighted the guy even more. He colored and beamed at Eckhart. "Always a pleasure to meet another Regiment officer."

Eckhart turned to another man standing next to Rohrbach. "And you? What's your name?"

This guy straightened up and squared his shoulders, but he didn't offer his hand. "Captain Logan Moyers."

Eckhart nodded. "Thank you gentlemen for your help." He headed back the way he'd come.

"Don't you want to use the elevator?" Rohrbach called after him.

"I can find my way. Thanks."

Eckhart paused on the terrace outside. Ingai was studying him way too closely. "What happened?" Thagmor demanded. "Did they show you where the lab is?"

Eckhart nodded, but his mind remained on the bridge. He couldn't fathom what the hell was going on around here. None of this made any sense.

"So?" Thagmor began again. "Are we going?"

Eckhart nodded again. Ingai kept scrutinizing him with uncomfortable intensity, but fortunately for Eckhart's sanity, he didn't ask.

Eckhart headed for the stairs, still thinking it all over. The lab was only twenty floors below him, but he already knew he wouldn't just be able to walk there. Some impassable barrier separated him from it. He just didn't know what that barrier was…yet.

He scanned the chasm on his way to the stairs. Were the assets out there watching him right now? Were they preparing to attack?

He had to turn his back to the chasm to open the stairwell door. He'd stepped through it when an almighty blast detonated the terrace right behind him.

A curtain of debris and pelting rubble smashed into the stairwell and slammed the door with him inside. Repeated blasts pounded the terrace outside, and he didn't dare open the door for a second.

The booming concussions migrated just the tiniest inch away, and he yanked the door open to a scene of utter pandemonium. Five assets hovered in the chasm, assaulting the tier all around the stairs, but they didn't target Eckhart. The assets veered back and forth, laying down a devastating barrage on the terrace between the stairwell and the bridge.

Eckhart dashed outside, searching everywhere for Ingai and Thagmor. He had to check himself before he ran off the edge of the ripped floor that dropped away into empty space.

He teetered there, trying to steady himself in between searching for his friends. He spotted Ingai crouching near another crumbling precipice farther down the tier.

Four of the assets lambasted Ingai with dozens of shots. A small Destrine shield protected his back from one blast after another. More booming concussions shook the floor and destroyed walls and compartments all around him.

Eckhart dashed close to the wall, trying to reach Ingai, and when he got nearer, his stomach twisted when he saw Thagmor.

Thagmor clung to the edge by two arms. He twisted his body around and fired his remaining weapons at the assets with his other two guns, but he couldn't drive them off. Ingai stretched over the side, trying to drag him back to safety, but every punishing explosion threatened to knock Thagmor into the abyss.

Eckhart sprinted for Ingai, but before he got there, one of the assets swooped in. His laser struck the floor right in front of

Eckhart.

The shot scorched a hole across Eckhart's path, and the concrete splintered. The whole tier shuddered and started to separate from the superstructure.

It swayed and paused, dangling in midair. Eckhart prepared himself for one last run to grab Ingai when a jet of Datrium erupted from Eckhart's right.

The shot hit one of the assets nearest to Thagmor, and the man swerved back under the blow. More Datrium spouted from the shadows, and Eckhart's heart leapt into his mouth as Innyria, Chemorix, and Namol advanced on Ingai's position.

Their attack distracted the assets, who pivoted to return the gang leaders' fire. Eckhart took his chance and threw himself across what was left of the floor. He landed on his stomach and stretched out, trying to reach Ingai.

"Ingai!" he bellowed over the noise of continuous gunfire. "Ingai! Grab onto me!"

Ingai flung one arm behind him, still grappling to keep hold of Thagmor. Eckhart strapped both hands around Ingai's bony wrist.

Ingai's countenance washed with relief, and his eyes spilled Destrine over the side to surround Thagmor.

Eckhart dug his toes into the floor and tried to pull Ingai back from the brink when two more assets swiveled back toward him. The other three kept up a steady rain of fire on the gang leaders.

Eckhart glanced over to make sure his friends were okay. His spirits plunged all over again when he noticed that the assets weren't targeting the three men at all.

The assets zoomed back and forth, bombarding the whole tier to rubble. They smashed up the floor, the walls behind the gang leaders, and they especially concentrated their fire on the tier between Eckhart and the other three.

Eckhart couldn't think about that now. He floundered for something to hold onto to get Ingai and Thagmor to safety, but the remaining two assets attacked before he could move.

He stared in confused horror as they made their move, but they didn't shoot at him or his friends. Eckhart couldn't understand it when both assets dropped down the chasm and unloaded on the structure beneath him.

The whole tier groaned, and a massive crack jolted across the floor right behind Ingai. The broken section peeled away. Eckhart

grasped Ingai's arm with all his might, but before he could move, the assets delivered another brutal strike to the floor's underside.

The pavement flipped up and snapped Eckhart's and Ingai's arms apart. Eckhart lost his grip on his friend, and both Ingai and Thagmor fell away into space.

"No!" Eckhart screamed, but it was too late.

The two aliens plummeted into darkness. Eckhart caught a faint gleam of blue down there, but the assets didn't give him an instant's reprieve. They soared up to his level, and now they really laid into him. They didn't pull any punches this time.

The first smash landed right in front of him. He sprang up and retreated backward. He had to duck under his arms as more lasers skittered across the wall where his head had been a moment before.

He heard Innyria yelling at him from behind. "Eckhart!"

Eckhart tried to turn back to reach his friends, but the assets didn't let him. They fired again, and a vicious plasma blast exploded another compartment right behind him.

He dove to his left and took off running, but the assets kept pace with him every step of the way. They bombarded him with hundreds of shots, and a chunk from one of the detonating compartments slammed into his shoulder.

The impact knocked him off his feet. He tilted to his right as another sickening wave of pain shattered his brain.

He didn't see where he was going, but even if he did, it didn't help him. The assets hammered the tier with another dozen shots, and the whole floor evaporated under him.

Ingai wasn't here to save him now, and he toppled off into the void. He barely got himself twisted around in time, and caught the railing on the tier directly beneath him to stop himself from plunging to his death.

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6

Eckhart twirled at the end of one arm. His other arm hung useless and shattered from his shoulder. He yelped in pain every time his weight made him spin the other way.

His fingers slipped a little on the railing. He wouldn't be able to pull himself up like this.

His only chance at survival was to swing onto the tier below, but even thinking about that hurt. He gasped in agony while he prepared himself to do what he had to do.

The assets vaulted higher up the chasm. They concentrated their attack on the three gang leaders, and even now, Eckhart saw the battle moving away. Innyria, Namol, and Chemorix must have given up trying to reach Eckhart under such a vicious bombardment.

He didn't blame them. With any luck, they'd come and find him here, but he couldn't even hope for that. The assets seemed to be trying to cut him away from his friends. Why?

They hadn't attacked until he got inside the stairwell. If he'd stayed where he was, he would have been safe through the whole thing. Then he wouldn't be in this situation at all.

He searched the shadows far below for any sign of Thagmor and Ingai. Eckhart immediately changed his mind when his head swam from vertigo.

He dragged his addled senses back to the problem of getting onto the next tier below. He wasn't looking forward to landing with his shoulder destroyed, but he had to do something pretty quick. His grip already came perilously close to failing.

He clamped his lips together, held his breath, and swung his legs outward. The pain skyrocketed off the charts and he actually screamed in misery, but he couldn't stop now.

He heaved his legs forward and got himself into a decent swing. He judged that he was moving far enough over the tier, and let go.

Eckhart slammed down on his broken arm and bellowed in pain. He rolled onto his back, hugging his arm against his chest while he blinked fireworks out of his head. This was so much worse than getting his legs crushed, and now he couldn't look forward to Ingai

fixing him up. Where was Bing? Eckhart couldn't count on him, either.

He rolled onto his knees, gasping and panting. Sweat drenched his face and saturated his shirt. He didn't want to move for fear of another dose of that kind of pain, but he couldn't stay here.

He had to crouch there shuddering before he managed to get to his feet, but he couldn't stand up straight. He cradled his arm. That feeling of broken bone seared into his chest and destroyed his ability to think.

He had to find Bing, or Ingai, or *something*. He couldn't fight the assets like this, but at least they didn't come back to attack him again.

Then he remembered. He squinted up into the light. The assets kept pounding the upper tiers. They must be fighting the three gang leaders…so why didn't the assets come back for Eckhart? They must know where he was.

He limped back to the stairs. He didn't know where Bing was, but when he got into the stairwell, the same switch flipped in his mind. The Regiment had done this. Eckhart didn't need to fight the assets. He just had to end this damn Stormbreaker once and for all. Everything else was secondary.

He climbed down twenty floors and exited on another tier exactly like the others… except for one thing.

He was all alone for the first time since he'd killed Landau.

This was different, though. He approached the railing and shivered when he gazed out over the chasm. He knew this place.

It didn't look much different from every other part of the chasm. All the rooms and compartments across the expanse looked the same, but he knew. This was the spot where he'd been standing in his nightmares.

A distant feeling took hold of him. That sensation of something hidden and indescribable pulled him forward. It guided his footsteps where it wanted him to go. He didn't have to wonder anymore where he was going or what he would find when he got there.

He turned away. His legs moved in ways they hadn't in the dream. His heels struck the floor and every step hurt his shoulder, but nothing disturbed this hazy fog surrounding his mind.

He floated in a dream toward the lab. He already knew where it was.

The faint light from his nightmare shone out of the lab before he got near the door. The Ioscesten tanks gleamed against the far wall. Figures of himself floated inside, with wires and tubes hooked up to their arms. His nightmare was coming to life before his eyes.

He turned into the doorway—and stopped. The lab wasn't empty. None of the technicians or scientists worked in here now, but it wasn't empty the way he'd seen it so many times in his dreams and visions.

The distillation apparatuses still bubbled on the work tables. Beakers of nameless clear fluid and even a few preserved fetuses lined the tables, but Eckhart hardly noticed them.

A young man with short brown hair and a fresh, innocent-looking face looked up from a bank of computers near the tanks. He wore a pristine Regiment uniform. No one would know from looking at this guy that the Regiment had been declared outlaw, and banned throughout the galaxy.

He smiled. "Oh, good. You finally made it. Come on in and I'll fix your arm."

Eckhart didn't move. His eyes flicked sideways. Dallas stood next to the work table. More wires connected his armor to the computer the officer had been working on. Dallas stood motionless the way he'd stood on Gruna. This asshole must have deactivated him.

Eckhart didn't blame him. Dallas would have burned down the whole ship if he'd been conscious enough to do it.

His stomach flipped all over again at the sight of his friend. He had to free Dallas. As soon as he did, Eckhart could use Dallas against the assets. It was the perfect solution. Eckhart just had to figure out how to do it without this chump stopping him.

The officer startled Eckhart back to his senses by injecting something into Eckhart's arm. The pain of his broken shoulder instantly evaporated and he relaxed, against his will.

The guy stuck out his hand. "Rear Admiral Enoch Mitchell."

Eckhart ignored the hand. "I know who you are."

Mitchell beamed at him. "Of course you do. That was an unfortunate business with that alien of yours, wasn't it? I'd love to know how you got rid of him."

"What the hell are you doing here?" Eckhart's gaze darted back to Dallas. "What are you doing with Dallas?"

Mitchell went back to his computers. "We had to get you on the

Stormbreaker somehow. We weren't sure if our transmissions would be enough, so we captured Dallas, too." He stood back and admired Dallas. "He's a real work of art, isn't he?"

"You—" Eckhart stopped himself. "What transmissions?"

"Your nightmares, of course. We transmitted them into your mind so you'd feel compelled to come here. We needed you to come back to us, and now you're here."

The admiral turned his charming smile on Eckhart, beaming at him with the same bemused delight he bestowed on Dallas.

Eckhart dared to take another step into the lab. His shoulder didn't hurt anymore. It was back to normal. "What do you want with me? What are you doing with all these people? Why do they all look like me?"

The admiral laughed like this was the greatest day of his life. He waved at the tanks behind him. "It was our greatest experiment ever—and our first. You were our first experiment."

He clapped Eckhart on both shoulders and squeezed in friendly, almost familial intimacy. The admiral's eyes shone with pleasure, but that close gesture made Eckhart's skin crawl. "What are you talking about? I'm not an experiment."

"Sure you are. How do you think we did all this? We couldn't have done any of this without you."

"Me? I don't have anything to do with your stupid experiments."

"Of course you do. You have everything to do with them. You must realize that by now." He gestured to the tanks again. "All of these men have been treated with your DNA. We couldn't create these assets without your DNA."

Eckhart shuddered. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"We could have done more if you hadn't disappeared. That's why we had to get you back. We thought you were dead, but then you turned up in charge of this alien rebellion. The DNA strains we took from you are becoming corrupted. We cloned them too many times. That's why you're here—so we can take pure samples from you."

Eckhart couldn't speak. The unbearable weight of the admiral's revelation crushed him and made it impossible to breathe.

The admiral strolled along the tanks, talking away. "Your parents were our first test subjects. Your father was a Regiment sergeant—very dedicated and exceptionally strong. He was an instructor in hand-to-hand combat. That's why we selected him. He

volunteered."

"*Volunteered?*" Eckhart interrupted. "Are you sure he volunteered, or are you just saying that?"

Admiral Mitchell grinned at him. "Let's not split hairs, shall we? He came into the lab one way or the other, and then his charming wife joined us, too. It didn't take long for her to get pregnant, but by then, we'd already figured out how to splice alien DNA into her chromosomes."

Eckhart couldn't see. A million images flooded his mind as those words penetrated his brain. They seemed to be rewriting his DNA right now.

"The experiment worked out better than we ever dared to dream. We'd tried hybridizing humans and aliens before, but this…"

Mitchell stopped in front of Eckhart, basking in so much admiration that Eckhart didn't know what to think. He didn't seem to know *how* to think anymore.

"We tested you and found out that not only did the hybridization process work, but it completely concealed the fact that you had ever *been* hybridized. Your DNA was totally human. Only certain gene expressions turned up as non-human, but if anyone scanned you, they'd never find out. It was the perfect outcome. *You* were the perfect outcome—our greatest triumph."

He waited for Eckhart to respond. Mitchell's sunny expression darkened slightly when he saw that Eckhart wasn't eating this up as much as he was.

He finally shrugged and went back over to Dallas. "Anyway, we took plenty of samples, and it was just as well that we did. About six months after you were born, your parents jumped ship. They kidnapped you from the lab, stole a Banshee, and bolted into the fringes. We lost them somewhere around the Aurata system. We kept searching, but when we still didn't find them, we had no choice."

"What did you do?" Eckhart husked.

"We used our remote kill switches, of course. We couldn't let our experiments run around the fringes, where anyone could find out what we were doing. We assumed you would die, too. You were too young to take care of yourself. We thought your parents would die in space, and you would starve or freeze or something, but you must have already been on Parilia by then. It only makes sense

because here you are, alive and well."

Mitchell tried to beam at Eckhart again, but Eckhart couldn't look at him. He kept searching the lab. "What species did you hybridize me with?"

Mitchell laughed, sprang over to his computer, and started working on it. "That was our greatest genius! It was the Scovex. Isn't that magnificent? Look!"

He turned his computer around to show Eckhart a DNA sequence laid out on the screen. Chemical nomenclature tags marked certain parts of the chain, but they didn't mean anything to Eckhart.

"We wanted to use a species with no special powers. We wanted the hybrid to be as human as possible—indistinguishable from a pure human, if possible—and it worked!" Mitchell cackled with insane laughter. "No one can tell! You're as human as I am."

Eckhart stared at the image in front of him. So it was all true. He really *was* an alien after all—or partly.

He'd spent all these years agonizing about where he belonged. He'd lived between two worlds, the only Earthling in a vast galaxy of alien planets. He'd ached for years to find his place on the fringes, while strangers and even his closest friends reminded him daily that he was an Earthling.

Now he found out he'd really belonged to the fringes all along. He'd been where he belonged from the beginning.

A million puzzle pieces snapped into place. He didn't belong on Earth. He would never belong there. He had no desire to live among Earthlings, and now he didn't have to.

He'd always feared that, by driving the Regiment out of the fringes, he himself would have to retreat to Earth, too. He could finally put that fear to rest forever.

He wasn't the only Earthling on the fringes because he wasn't an Earthling. He never had been. He wouldn't be the only Earthling on the fringes after this war ended.

That weight lifted off his shoulders. He could finally breathe again. He knew the truth and it changed everything, but at the same time, it didn't change anything.

He was still the leader in charge of the alien rebellion. He was the one responsible for destroying the Regiment.

His vision cleared. He stood before the one man responsible for this whole disaster. This man standing in front of him…this man

was the one who'd started it all. He was the one who'd been experimenting with a way to destroy the fringes…and he'd started it all with Eckhart.

Eckhart's anger didn't come back to life. It vanished entirely. He felt nothing—absolutely nothing for this man and the lab and the Regiment and the Stormbreaker and the visions and Earth.

He only cared about one thing—getting back to his people. He cared for nothing but making sure the fringes continued after this without having to worry about the Regiment ever again.

"Well?" Mitchell asked. "What do you think? Things are going to be great now that you're back. Just imagine what we can accomplish. We've been working with one hand tied behind our back for years because we didn't have pure strains. All of that's going to change now. I can't tell you how excited we all are."

"Hold it," Eckhart interrupted. "You want me to actually *participate* in these experiments?"

"You don't have to participate. We'll take samples from you and replicate them. You can just kick back and relax. We'll insert the DNA samples in other test subjects. They're the ones who will participate."

"You inserted DNA samples from *me* into…" Eckhart reeled again when the truth hit him.

"We had to," Mitchell insisted. "We used retroviruses to splice your samples into the subjects' DNA. It was the only way to prep their genes to accept more alien expression packages. Of course, we had to change a few things when we started working on Nuñez, Jenks, and D'Alia. We couldn't have a whole army of Eckharts running around the galaxy, could we?"

He laughed again. He kept examining Eckhart, waiting for him to show some delight or even approval.

"So you sent those 'transmissions' to bring me here, and then you…" Eckhart glanced behind him toward the door. "You sent the assets to attack my friends."

"We had to. We needed you to come alone, but then you blew up the training hall and got yourself injured. I had to let Ingai sense where you were so he could heal you."

Eckhart ran his hand across his eyes. Now he knew. He didn't have to ask any more questions. "What are you going to do with Dallas?"

"We'll strip him down and fragment his operating system. We'll

figure out how to reprogram the assets with his operating system so we can duplicate his speed and accuracy."

Eckhart made a snap decision. "It'd be real nice if I had a friend around to talk to while I'm providing you with DNA samples, kicking back and relaxing. I might get lonely and go looking for a friend elsewhere."

The admiral jumped. "Oh. Of course. Are you saying...?"

"Could you turn him back on? I'd really like to talk to him."

"Oh. Okay." The admiral went over to his computer, pressed his palm to the screen to turn it on, and started tapping on it. Eckhart's chest tightened as he counted down the seconds.

Tension stretched his nerves to the breaking point. This asshole had ruined his life. This cocksucker was the reason Eckhart had grown up an orphan on the streets of a destitute planet crawling with criminal aliens. This man would rather have killed Eckhart than let him grow up at all, but that wasn't the worst.

This man was the one speed bump standing between Eckhart and the rest of his life. He'd gotten that realization before he left the *Atera*. The rest of his life waited for him out there on the fringes. He just had to remove this one last headache from his path.

The admiral's expression cleared again, and he glanced over at Dallas. "There. That should do it."

Dallas' head shot up and he tilted his helmet from right to left. "Re-initializing…"

Eckhart burst out laughing in relief. "Hey, man. How are you feeling?"

"Eckhart." Dallas turned his helmet the other way. "Where are we? We appear to be on a Regiment Stormbreaker…" He trained his optical lens on the admiral. "Rear Admiral Enoch Mitchell."

Mitchell turned to face him. "I can't tell you what an honor it is to meet you, Dallas. I know we're going to do great work togeth—"

Eckhart reacted in a flash. He seized a large beaker from the work table and brought it down with all his might on the admiral's head.

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7

Rear Admiral Enoch Mitchell folded at the knees, crashed onto the floor, and flopped forward without putting out his arms to break his fall.

Eckhart attacked in a frenzy. He didn't have any other weapon, so he snatched the broken neck of the beaker he'd just broken over the guy's head. He slammed down in a straddle on the admiral's back and raised the razor-sharp shard to finish the bastard off.

As soon as Eckhart got into that position, the admiral rallied and started to struggle. He flapped his arms to free himself and flailed in a puddle of whatever mysterious clear fluid he had been experimenting with.

Eckhart jammed his left hand down on the back of the admiral's neck to hold Mitchell in position. He raised the shard for another strike, but the admiral turned out to be stronger than he looked.

He jerked sideways and almost unseated Eckhart. Eckhart lunged with his makeshift blade, and the point chipped on the tile floor next to the admiral's head.

The admiral turned all the way over, despite Eckhart's best efforts to hold him down. Eckhart struck again, but the admiral caught his hand, and they both wrestled over the shard.

Dallas watched impassively from directly above Eckhart's head. "Do you need any help, Eckhart?"

A brutal smash cut Eckhart off from answering. Plasma jetted into the lab and destroyed three distillation apparatuses in one shot.

Glass exploded in Dallas' face and rained on the floor around Mitchell and Eckhart.

Eckhart tried to look behind him to see who was shooting. Four assets hovered beyond the lab entrance.

"Shoot, Dallas!" Eckhart roared.

"Who should I shoot, Eckhart?" Dallas asked.

"The assets, of course! Fight them off! Kill them if you can."

"Oh." Dallas looked up at the assets like he'd just noticed them. "Okay. If you say so."

He rocketed away in a blinding streak, but as soon as he got near the door, he hit what looked like an invisible barrier. Dallas

slammed into it and collapsed on the floor, as inert as before.

Eckhart had enough to deal with fighting the admiral, and couldn't go check on Dallas. Mitchell grimaced up at Eckhart, let go of Eckhart's wrist, and slammed his other palm into Eckhart's sternum.

A colossal energy burst exploded into Eckhart's chest and hurled him back against another workstation. Mitchell swooped across the lab without touching the floor. Eckhart had half a second to realize the truth. Mitchell could move, fight, and react just like the assets, and he attacked Eckhart in a blinding fury.

Mitchell slashed his hands through the air, and invisible energy sliced every part of Eckhart's body. Every strike felt worse than Landau's magical stab. Lightning-fast swipes cut Eckhart to ribbons. They chopped down into his neck and shoulders, plunged into his chest and stomach, and hacked his arms and legs.

Punishing blows pounded Eckhart's head and face. He couldn't rise off the workstation. He felt himself falling under the assault, and his brain started to fade out.

More plasma blasted into the lab from outside. Some distant part of him wondered why the assets were attacking and destroying the lab that created them. The Regiment must want to keep this lab going.

Mitchell delivered a brutal smash to the side of Eckhart's head. He whipped sideways and crashed down on his hands and knees as more of Mitchell's energy weapons tore him to shreds.

He summoned the last of his energy to haul up his spinning head. He was facing the door, but he couldn't reach it.

Dallas sprawled in front of Eckhart's face. He wouldn't be able to help Eckhart get out of this. No one would.

A gut-wrenching spike of pain stabbed down into Eckhart's brain through the back of his skull. It obliterated all thought for a second. He became aware of Mitchell standing over him, and the horrible truth struck home.

Mitchell wouldn't kill him. Eckhart was too valuable. If Eckhart didn't give up his DNA samples willingly, Mitchell would find some other way to take them by force.

Maybe he'd hold Eckhart in one of those tanks. Maybe he'd give Eckhart some drug to paralyze him while Mitchell held him in suspended animation.

A sick feeling came over Eckhart when he remembered finding

Ingai in the suspension tank on Gruna. Eckhart thought at the time that the vision might be leading him to Gruna to see this alien in trouble.

Now he understood everything. The vision was real. Eckhart was the alien in the suspension tank—or he would be, if he didn't defeat Mitchell.

Not even that broke Mitchell's power over him. The terrible pain of all Mitchell's weapons destroying Eckhart's body pinned him down so he couldn't move.

Another smash rocked the Stormbreaker outside the lab. Some giant weight collided with the door, and the impact shattered the walls. A blur of movement outside caught Eckhart's eye, and he froze.

The assets were still out there spitting lasers and plasma and bombs in all directions, but they weren't shooting into the lab the way Eckhart had first thought.

One of the assets dodged sideways, and a primed Halfanite block somersaulted into the lab. It bounced off Dallas' armored back and rolled onto the floor by the admiral's workstation.

In that fraction of an instant when the asset moved out of the way, Eckhart caught sight of Bing, DeWalt, and Namol all firing on the assets on the terrace outside.

Eckhart's brain switched back on. His friends were back. They were all outside fighting to get into the lab. They were trying to reach him.

The Halfanite block tumbled against the workstation. Mitchell was too busy hammering Eckhart to notice it.

Eckhart flung himself sideways. He'd barely rolled behind another workstation before the Halfanite detonated in an almighty boom. He covered his head, but as soon as the Halfanite went off, he realized his mistake.

The blast didn't touch Mitchell. He remained standing through it all and stalked over to Eckhart. He seized Eckhart by the collar and yanked him to his feet. Mitchell slammed Eckhart down on the workstation and started pounding again.

The first crushing blow knocked Eckhart flat. Both his arms splayed out to the sides. He reeled under the barrage—and then his hand touched something sharp.

He grappled for the shard of broken beaker he'd dropped a moment before—or it might have been a different one. He didn't

think twice. He grabbed it and stabbed it down with all his might at Mitchell's head.

The shard hit that invisible force surrounding the admiral. Mitchell stood still and let Eckhart strike again and again, but nothing penetrated that field. The shard chipped and lost its edge, but Eckhart couldn't get it any nearer to Mitchell's face.

Mitchell only smirked at Eckhart from inside his protective shield. That smirk drove Eckhart wild. He had to kill this bastard if it was the last thing he ever did.

The simple fact that Mitchell had deactivated Dallas set Eckhart's rage loose the way it had on Gruna when Eckhart fought Phrolain. Defending himself didn't send Eckhart into that black place, but protecting his friend sure did.

Eckhart glanced around the lab for any weapon he could use. He didn't see anything, but he couldn't stand by and do nothing.

He charged Mitchell and tackled him around the middle. Eckhart hurled his weight against Mitchell to wrestle the admiral to the ground, but Mitchell didn't budge. His feet rooted to the floor by some unbreakable force while Eckhart wrenched and jerked and tugged to unseat him.

Mitchell started laughing at the comical pathetic futility of Eckhart's efforts. That on its own fueled Eckhart's blood rage more than anything. He had to pay this son of a bitch back for all the hateful things he had done.

More explosions boomed outside the lab. Gunshots destroyed the walls, and some of the plaster dislodged. Mitchell pretended not to notice until one of the assets crashed into a section of the already damaged door frame.

A thread of Destrine laced into the lab. That got Mitchell's attention, and he turned to look.

Eckhart reacted in a flash. He dodged around the workstation and dove on top of Dallas.

Eckhart went to work fast. He still wasn't sure what he would do or even what he *could* do, but Dallas was the only weapon powerful enough to defeat the admiral. He had to try. He attacked Dallas' arm prosthetic, clawing at the slots on Dallas' wrists where his assault guns lay hidden when he wasn't using them.

Mitchell strolled over, taking his sweet time. He stood over Eckhart watching Eckhart's frantic efforts. "Give it up, Eckhart. You're never going to leave this ship. As soon as we take your

samples, we can make sure none of the aliens come back to bother us. We can all go on living in peace the way we—"

The slot snapped under Eckhart's fingers. His heart ached from pounding so hard against his ribs. He actually stopped breathing when the slot cover popped back to reveal the gun tucked inside.

Eckhart hurled himself down flat on the floor, depressed the lever to eject the weapon, and jammed his finger on the firing mechanism.

The gun discharged under Eckhart's arm and a sizzle of Datrium hit the admiral in the chest. He must have forgotten to use his magical protection, because he staggered under the blast.

He struck the workstation where he'd just pinned Eckhart, but he bounced up right away. His eyes fixed on Eckhart in a knowing glare that Eckhart understood only too well. This guy wasn't going down easily.

Eckhart didn't wait around to find out what the admiral would do. He rocketed to his feet, charged the admiral, and caught the man by the hair before the admiral could put up his protective shield again.

He shoved Mitchell hard and made him stumble again, but Eckhart didn't let go of him. He rode Mitchell down to the ground and hauled Mitchell's head over to Dallas' assault gun.

Eckhart's fury snapped out of all control. He tore out the Datrium feed to Dallas' gun, and a dribble of plasma spilled from the broken tubing. He stuffed the tube into Mitchell's mouth.

Mitchell let loose one of his experimental weapons to hit Eckhart, and the Datrium exploded right in Mitchell's face. Eckhart had to shut his eyes and turn his face away as the spin-chilling thump erupted into Mitchell's head, but it didn't go off once and die. It kept rumbling on and on the longer Eckhart held the tube in place.

Eckhart crammed it in with sadistic force. Mitchell's body spasmed and twitched with convulsions, but Eckhart didn't release him. Dallas' new operating system would keep producing Datrium without end.

Eckhart could stand here torturing Mitchell all day long, but at that moment, another concussion smashed the lab from the outside. This one didn't disturb the lab itself, but the noise brought Eckhart back from his madness—at least a little bit.

He yanked the tube out and Mitchell flopped on the floor at

Eckhart's feet, but Eckhart saw at a glance that the attack hadn't harmed Mitchell. He was still perfectly intact. He was just unconscious.

Eckhart dropped on his knees and screwed the tube back into Dallas' assault gun. He and his friends were going to need that gun soon if they didn't already, but they needed Dallas even more.

He fought to get his lungs and heart working again while he dragged Mitchell over to the computer. Then he nearly cracked his spine pulling Dallas over there. Eckhart laid his friend out on the floor next to Mitchell and rolled Dallas onto his back. He had no idea what he was going to do here. He knew nothing about Dallas' inner workings, and even less about the Regiment's computer system.

Eckhart panted and wiped sweat off his brow while he tried to reattach the wires Mitchell had been using on Dallas, but he could only guess. He muscled Mitchell's body off the floor and slapped Mitchell's hand to the screen. The machine switched on, and Eckhart let Mitchell fall again.

Eckhart scrambled to figure out how the hell this computer worked. Everything he did to it only pulled up more and more DNA sequences. Most of them looked similar to each other—all except for Eckhart's.

He passed and repassed his own sequence while he fumbled around with all the other pages on the system. The longer he messed with this, the more he realized just how different his DNA sequence was from the others. He really was an alien. The Regiment had just concealed the fact by a clever combination of sequences embedded in a sea of Earthling DNA.

Nothing was working, and Eckhart couldn't mess with this anymore. He turned toward the door, only to shield his eyes from another splintering fountain of plaster and debris pinwheeling into the lab.

He grabbed Mitchell, and when Eckhart picked him up, Mitchell snapped awake. He started to struggle, but Eckhart was all finished playing games.

He yanked Mitchell around to face away from him, pulled the man in tight, and marched him toward the door.

Mitchell fought harder as they got near the fight. "Hey! What are you…?"

Eckhart tightened his grip. "You better be ready to defend

yourself, Admiral. I don't think your boys care too much if they hit you while they're trying to subdue me."

Mitchell started to respond. That was it. Eckhart had to shut the dipshit up for good.

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8

Eckhart shoved Rear Admiral Enoch Mitchell into the lab entrance and received a fresh barrage of laser fire in the face before the assets realized who it was.

Mitchell tried to retreat, but Eckhart hunkered down behind the admiral's back and let Mitchell take the assault. "Shoot back!" Eckhart roared in Mitchell's ear. "Drive them off!"

Mitchell squealed, and Eckhart forced the man another step onto the terrace. Namol, Thagmor, and Chemorix lined one side, exchanging fire with assets twenty feet away. Bing, DeWalt, and Innyria braced their guns on the railing across the chasm where they could take cover from the assets' fire. Ingai floated in a Destrine bubble over the vast, bottomless expanse. He plastered the assets with Destrine, but unlike before, he didn't concentrate on any one of them.

The assets finally realized who was coming out of the lab, and they cut their fire to concentrate on the intruders.

"I said fire on them!" Eckhart bellowed. "Fire on them now, or I'll throw myself off that railing and kill myself. Then you'll never get another DNA sample from me. Is that what you want?"

Words came out of Eckhart's mouth without any connected thought of his own. He didn't care anymore what he said or what he did. He had to beat these assholes, and Mitchell was the only way to do it.

Mitchell fired several lasers at the assets. He waved his arms to signal them to fall back. They hesitated when Ingai hit them a few more times, but eventually, they complied. They didn't leave the terrace, though.

Eckhart stuck his head over Mitchell's shoulder. "Ingai—hold this guy for me! Surround him so he can't do anything."

Ingai reacted instantly. He turned all his Destrine on the admiral and encased Mitchell in an unbreakable prison.

Eckhart raced away. "Bing—come here! Quick!"

Bing kept training his weapon on the assets, but they didn't attack. Eckhart hustled him into the lab. "What happened?" Bing asked. "Who is that guy? What's going on?"

“Forget all that!” Eckhart dragged him over to the computer. “I need you to reactivate Dallas. Hurry! I can’t figure this stupid thing out.”

Bing blinked down at Dallas, and then Bing’s face contorted when he saw the screen with Eckhart’s DNA sequence on it. “What the hell is this?”

“Ignore it.” Eckhart flipped to another page with one of the test subjects’ sequence. “These are just samples taken from the assets. Find Dallas’ systems and turn him on. Hurry up, Bing. We needed Dallas back on deck right now.”

Bing pushed his gun into Eckhart’s arms and got to work. He switched back and forth between pages Eckhart didn’t recognize. Bing finally pulled up a similar schematic on Dallas’ systems to the one he’d shown Eckhart on the *Atera*.

More gunshots echoed into the lab from out on the terrace, but they got farther away. Eckhart sure hoped Ingai was using Mitchell against the assets.

A clank started Eckhart back to his senses. Dallas shot upright into a sitting position, looking back and forth. “Re-initializing…”

“Dallas!” Eckhart squatted down next to his friend. “Are you okay?”

Dallas glanced around the destroyed lab. “We’re on the Stormbreaker. I remember.”

“Great! We need your help against the assets. We can’t beat them without you.”

Dallas stood up. “Something’s wrong with my right gun.”

“It still works, doesn’t it?” Eckhart asked.

Dallas popped open the same slot and fiddled with the Datrium feed. “It’s fine.”

Eckhart patted his big shoulder. “Wonderful. Do you think you could help us out?”

“Of course.”

He trooped out of the lab and cocked his head again when he saw Mitchell hovering in Ingai’s Destrine ball. The admiral’s expression told everyone loud and clear what he thought of this state of affairs.

The assets hung off about thirty feet away. They didn’t attack and they didn’t leave. “What would you like me to do with them?” Dallas asked. “They don’t appear to be a threat at the moment.”

“They might not be right now, but we can’t hold the admiral in

Destrine for the rest of eternity."

"Ingai won't be able to hold the others at the same time," Bing pointed out. "We came here to finish them."

"They aren't making it any easier by just standing there," Dallas added. "It would be easier if they attacked us."

Eckhart squinted toward the assets. "There are only ten of them here. There must be more somewhere on this ship."

"What do you want to do?" Bing asked. "How do we finish them?"

"I have an idea." Eckhart went over to Ingai. Destrine streamed from his eyes and mouth. It twined around Admiral Mitchell and swirled in a glowing blue ball. "Put him down, Ingai."

"Are you sure?"

Eckhart nodded, put his hand in his pocket, and pulled out the remote control Rixby had given him on the *Atera*. He pushed the button, but nothing happened.

"You won't get away with this," Mitchell snarled.

Eckhart studied the man and still felt nothing for him, not even the desire to kill him. Eckhart only cared about removing this man and all these assets from his path, and there was only one way to do that.

He pulled Ingai away from the others, and when Eckhart was certain none of the others could overhear, he lowered his voice to a murmur. "I want you to go out into space, Ingai. I want you to go back to the Vrali fleet and get your people out. I want you to surround this Stormbreaker with Destrine, and don't let anything in or out except the *Marathon*. Do you understand?"

"Of course, Eckhart. You can count on us."

"Thank you. I really appreciate it. Don't do anything. Just hold the Stormbreaker in place and protect it so nothing else can get in or out."

Ingai's intense gaze probed Eckhart's mind as never before. Eckhart didn't have to say what he was thinking out loud. "I understand."

Eckhart squeezed his friend's arm. Ingai turned aside, vaporized through the nearest wall, and vanished.

Mitchell grinned at Eckhart when he rejoined his friends. "You won't be able to do anything to me without him. None of these people can kill me, not even Dallas."

"Should we test that out?" Dallas slotted out his assault gun and

pointed it straight in Mitchell's face.

"Go ahead," Mitchell snarled. "Eckhart already tried to shoot me full of all the Datrium you've got. It didn't do anything to me. Ask him."

Eckhart pushed Dallas' arm down. "Forget that. Cool it, Dallas. We'll get this done another way."

"We'd better," Dallas snapped.

Eckhart took hold of Mitchell's elbow. "Come on, buddy. Let's go."

"Where are we going?"

"To the bridge."

Eckhart entered the stairs. Bing, three gang leaders, Thagmor, and the two Earthlings joined them, but the assets didn't. They stayed where they were.

Thagmor stood guard on the terrace until all the others got into the stairwell. Eckhart lost sight of the assets. He didn't care about them anymore. The life waiting for him outside this ship overrode everything else. He was finished wasting his time with all these other distractions.

He pushed Mitchell onto the bridge, and Dallas wedged his big body in behind them. Mitchell got a much bigger reaction than Eckhart did. All the officers stopped what they were doing to salute him.

"You can all relax," Eckhart told them.

The officers looked to Mitchell for approval. Whatever authority they thought Eckhart had didn't last long with Mitchell around.

Eckhart went over to the controls on the stage. "Are all the civilians off the Stormbreaker?"

"Yes, sir," Major Rohrbach replied. "They're all clear of the Keilara system, but three alien fleets are moving in on the civilians. The aliens are arming to attack. Should we deploy Banshees to defend the civilians' retreat?"

"Let me see."

The bridge staff brought up a chart showing the Regiment civilians making their last-ditch sprint for Earth, but they were way too far away. They'd never make it with the aliens moving in to wipe them out.

Eckhart pointed to the *Atera*. "Open a communications channel with that ship right there."

"That's an alien ship," Captain Logan Moyers pointed out. "We

don't deal with them."

"Open it now," Eckhart ordered, "unless you want to stand here and watch all your families get slaughtered."

They went to work. Minutes dragged by while they figured out how to hail the *Atera*.

Rixby's face appeared on the controls. She gasped when she saw Major Rohrbach. "Eckhart! What's going on over there?"

Eckhart shoved Rohrbach out of the way. "I need you to take the fleet to the—" He checked the civilians' position. "To the Trolquals system. A bunch of Regiment Banshees are under attack by aliens. I need you to intervene and stop the attack. Flex your authority if you have to."

"If aliens are attacking Regiment Banshees, shouldn't we let them?"

"Just go, Rixby! It's an emergency. You can promise the aliens I'll personally guarantee their revenge, but not like this. Go! You have to stop them."

"All right, Eckhart. I'll—"

"Your days of being an alien hero are over, Eckhart," Mitchell interrupted. "This won't work."

Eckhart ignored him and cut the channel to the *Atera*, but the ship was already racing away out of range. He dragged his attention back to Major Rohrbach. "Does this Stormbreaker have a self-destruct mechanism?"

Rohrbach didn't answer. He only nodded and glanced over at Mitchell again.

"That won't work," Dallas interrupted. "The assets can just fly off into space."

"Not with the Ihi holding the Stormbreaker. Look. Here they come."

Eckhart's fleet streaked away to keep up with the *Atera*, but the Vrali destroyers waited a little longer. Thousands upon millions of tiny blue lights drifted through the destroyers' hulls and swirled through space. They drew closer to the Stormbreaker and formed a halo around the ship.

"Are they dangerous?" Rohrbach asked. "They aren't attacking."

"They aren't dangerous," Eckhart replied. "Show me your self-destruct system."

Moyers brought up the same floor plan of the Stormbreaker, but this one had been updated to show the blown-out sections where

the Datrium cistern had exploded. “We have four other cisterns. The system is connected to them all.”

“This won’t work, Eckhart,” Dallas interrupted again. “If you set off the ship’s self-destruct system, they’ll just deactivate it as soon as we leave. We need another plan.”

Eckhart smiled at him. “We aren’t going to set off the self-destruct sequence.” He turned away. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Eckhart!” Mitchell called after him. “You don’t have to leave. You’ll never find any other place out there. This is the only place anyone will ever understand you.”

Eckhart grinned at him, feeling a flood of happiness for the first time. “I hope you’re right. I really do.” He touched Dallas’ elbow. “Let’s go.”

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9

“What are you up to, Eckhart?” Dallas muttered under his breath.

“Keep quiet. We can’t beat these guys the old-fashioned way. You heard what Admiral Mitchell said. Not even you can kill him.”

“So what are you going to do?”

They stepped out onto the terrace outside the bridge. Eckhart took one last, long look across the chasm at a view from his visions. He would never see this place again—the place where he’d met his destiny.

“Are you okay, Eckhart?” Bing asked. “What happened in the lab between you and Mitchell?”

Eckhart didn’t answer. He’d take that secret to his grave. He made up his mind right then and there. He’d never tell anyone the truth about himself. He didn’t have to. It made all the difference to himself, and that was enough.

Not even Ingai could see it when he’d looked into Eckhart’s eyes that last time. Eckhart had locked his secret away in a box at the very darkest bottom of his soul.

He’d never wanted to hide anything from Ingai before. Now he realized that he could hide this. Ingai could look into Eckhart’s mind as much as he wanted. He wouldn’t be able to see the truth if Eckhart didn’t want him to find it.

He turned around to face his friends. They all studied him with curious, searching expressions. They didn’t need to know. This little gem was just for Eckhart. He’d cherish it in his heart forever. It freed him of everything and left the open road clear before him. He just had to follow it.

He started to say something when a whoosh of engine noise made him face the chasm again. The view across the expanse shivered with energy as the *Marathon* floated out of the void.

It turned in space, but the ship was still several floors below the crew. It had come to the spot where Eckhart had activated his remote control.

He took a step toward the stairs. “Come on. Let’s go.”

Dallas caught up with him. “You still haven’t told us how you’re going to destroy the Stormbreaker. What’s your plan?”

“My plan is to get back on the *Marathon*. After that—”

A deafening crash cut him off, and then a million shots smashed the terrace right in front of the friends. The assets exploded out of the shadows and opened fire on the fleeing crew.

Eckhart shoved Clifton and DeWalt in front of him. “Go! Get down to the ship!”

They dove for the stairwell, but Eckhart hadn’t gone more than a few steps before he realized the assets weren’t missing anymore. They fired directly at the *Marathon* crew, and one of their shots hit Thagmor.

It would have obliterated him, but the shot hit one of his guns. The weapon detonated in his hands, and the second blast flung him into the wall.

Namol and Eckhart rushed over to him. Bing started to turn back, but Eckhart waved him away. “Go! Get out of here!”

Bing and the two Earthlings reached the stairwell first. They barely entered it before the assets unloaded on the whole structure with merciless precision. They bombed the terrace to powder, and the stairwell started to cave in.

Eckhart had one second to recognize Admiral Mitchell fighting with the assets. Then he and Namol hefted Thagmor to his feet. “We can’t go that way!” Eckhart yelled. “We have to find another stairwell.”

Innyria and Chemorix turned in front of him. The two gang leaders laid into the assets with guns blazing while Eckhart and Namol dragged Thagmor away.

As soon as they started moving, the assets ignored Bing’s group and turned their attention on Eckhart’s party. Eckhart didn’t want to think about whether the other three were okay.

The assets demolished the terrace on all sides, and the floor cracked beneath Eckhart’s feet. He stumbled one way and Namol stumbled the other. They almost went down, and the whole structure swayed and groaned underfoot.

“Over here!” Chemorix bellowed, and bolted into one of the neighboring rooms.

Eckhart didn’t see any way out of there, but he trusted Chemorix. Eckhart and Namol tilted in that direction. Thagmor tried to walk, and failed. His weight strained Eckhart’s every fiber, but they just had to keep going.

They entered the room, but Eckhart didn’t see Chemorix

anywhere. The continuous bombardment outside built to a thunderous din. Eckhart glanced behind him in time to see the terrace crumble. The floor fell away, crawling one torturous inch at a time toward the room.

The walls gave way as successive blasts decimated the structure. The floor under Eckhart's feet trembled and started to tip at an angle.

"Chemorix!" Namol roared. "Where are you?"

Eckhart tried to turn back, but at that moment, the floor dropped beneath him. He didn't see Dallas or Innyria. Lasers twirled through the front wall, and then unseen crashes devastated the whole front half of the room.

"Chemorix!" Namol thundered. "Chemorix!"

Another catastrophic blow struck the room, and gravity caught Thagmor's body. He roared and pulled out of Eckhart's grip, but Eckhart had enough to worry about trying to stop himself from falling through the imploding structure.

Namol yelled in alarm, and at that moment, Chemorix charged out of the mayhem. Eckhart didn't see where he came from.

Chemorix collided with all three of them and kept on going. He ran full tilt into the assets' fire, through the dust cloud of erupting walls and plaster, and straight off the edge of the destroyed terrace.

It ended inches beyond where the wall had been. The assets hovered there, pelting the whole area with fire. Namol roared some inarticulate protest, and Eckhart cringed for the blow that ended all their lives, but Chemorix completely ignored them.

He took a running leap off the edge and dove, with his many arms pinning Thagmor, Namol, and Eckhart against his giant body.

His move took the assets completely by surprise. They didn't fire on him. Instead, they whizzed aside and he plunged straight between them.

The *Marathon*'s upper fuselage tilted before Eckhart's eyes, and then the ship rushed at his face as the four friends started to fall.

Namol bellowed again. Chemorix rocketed straight past the ship in a downward arc across the chasm. Eckhart couldn't watch, but he couldn't tear his eyes away, either.

The assets realized a second too late and opened fire again, but Chemorix was already past them. He tucked his legs, tumbled in space, and then aimed his head straight down into the bottomless pit.

He streaked past the *Marathon*, and all the assets' weaponry struck the ship. Deafening crashes echoed through the chasm, and one of the engines erupted in a blazing fireball.

Eckhart winced. Had he made a mistake bringing the ship here?

The ship took the brunt of the assets' fire. They couldn't hit the friends here. Chemorix plunged between the *Marathon* and the tiers on the far side. He shot out one of his massive arms, caught hold, and swung the friends onto an undamaged terrace. He buckled next to Thagmor. "Can you walk, my friend?"

Thagmor didn't answer. "He's unconscious," Namol replied. "We'll have to carry him the rest of the way."

More explosions punctuated the air from high above. Blasts and combusting plasma pounded the ship, and the strut holding the ruined engine snapped off.

Eckhart staggered over to Thagmor. "Come on. Get him up! We have to move."

He started to pick up Thagmor's arm, but he couldn't lift Thagmor on his own. Chemorix shoved Eckhart out of the way, and he and Namol picked up Thagmor between them.

Eckhart turned away. They were still four floors too high to get onto the *Marathon*.

He dashed to the stairs and held the door open for his friends. He cast one more glance at the *Marathon*. The ship listed under an even more vicious barrage as the assets started carving the hull apart.

"We can't use the *Marathon*," Namol told him on their way downstairs. "We need another way out."

Eckhart didn't answer. He kept going until he got to the right floor, and opened the door. The noise outside ratcheted up even higher. As soon as they got out on the terrace, another smash smacked the *Marathon* into the railing.

The metal sliced into the hull, and a shriek of tearing steel ripped through the air as the ship started to peel away from the terrace. Chemorix and Namol staggered onto the landing, carrying Thagmor's limp form, but when Eckhart tried to run for the ship, the assets whizzed around it to attack him.

They rained dozens of shots on the terrace, and it started to implode right on top of him. He wheeled away and collided with the other three.

Lasers and plasma flew all around him. They would hit him any

second now. He didn't see any way out, but before he could move, Dallas stormed through the mayhem and thrust his armored body in front of Eckhart.

Dallas opened fire on the assets, and all their shots deflected off his armor. "Do whatever you're going to do, Eckhart!" he roared over his shoulder.

Eckhart raced for the other three, and Innyria joined them. Eckhart hustled them back the other way while Dallas defended their retreat.

They made it back to the stairwell just as Bing, Clifton, and DeWalt came out of it. "What's…?" Bing began.

"Run!" Eckhart thundered. "Run for it!"

He pushed them all forward, and they bolted around the tier. They skirted the *Marathon* just as Admiral Mitchell and three other assets rocketed out of nowhere.

They opened up on the friends, and Innyria slowed to return their fire. Eckhart grabbed him. "Forget it! Just keep moving!"

"We have nowhere to go!" Innyria yelled back. "The *Marathon* is finished!"

"*Move!*" Eckhart roared. "Don't stop!"

The others really started looking at him like he was crazy, but at least they kept going. The assets unloaded on the structure in all their demonic ferocity. Walls vaporized all around Eckhart. He didn't know for sure, but he could swear Admiral Mitchell focused on him specifically.

Eckhart didn't have time to check. He could barely see where he was going anymore. Boulders and torn beams twirled all around their heads. Falling debris did as much damage as the assets' weaponry.

He bumped into his friends, dragged them along, and got dragged along with them. Explosions whoofed past his face and blew dust away long enough for him to see the *Marathon*, so he knew he was going in the right direction.

Another blast struck behind him, and he stumbled far enough to see the rear hatch. It was closed. He pointed his remote control at it and it unfolded to let them in, but it still took an eternity for him to get there.

Chemorix and Namol reached it first. They almost dropped Thagmor under another bombardment from the assets. Bing and DeWalt helped them drag Thagmor on board, and Innyria followed.

Then Clifton came out of somewhere and pulled Eckhart the rest of the way in. The friends stumbled into the cargo hold, and Chemorix and Namol both collapsed under Thagmor's weight.

The hull popped and screeched as the assets tore it apart. The stairs leading up to the bridge snapped off and crashed onto the floor, and then the upper deck attached to the crew quarters tore away.

Eckhart rushed back onto the ramp in time to see Dallas backing toward the ship. "Come on, Dallas! Leave it! Forget them!"

Dallas kept shooting at the assets, and didn't come. An explosion went off right behind him, and Eckhart lost sight of him.

Eckhart couldn't wait a second longer. He dove inside and charged to the weapons locker. He pulled out five Halfanite blocks, tottered over to where the Crick centrifuge used to be, and pitched all the blocks inside.

He packed them against the Destrine drive that Thagmor's crew had used to replace the *Marathon*'s original engines. His friends stood back, staring at him in horror while he scooped up another seven blocks and crammed them in, too.

"Eckhart," Bing began.

"Shut up!" Eckhart panted. "Dallas! Dallas, come on! Come now!"

Dallas stomped into the hold and looked around. The noise of explosions decimating the ship drowned out whatever he said next. Eckhart was too out of his mind even to be certain Dallas said anything.

"Pick him up!" Eckhart gasped. "Pick up Thagmor. Come here, DeWalt."

Eckhart scrambled around in a frenzy and realized that he was shaking with the tension. He wasn't sure if this would work, but it was his last option, and the only one guaranteed to do the job if it did work.

He towed Clifton and DeWalt across the floor. He positioned them, Bing, and Innyria near Namol and Chemorix.

"Hold onto each other," Eckhart ordered. "Put your arms around each other, as tight as you can."

Dallas stood across the floor, watching Eckhart instruct the others. Bing shrugged and wrapped his many limbs around Namol and Chemorix, who still held Thagmor between them.

Clifton and DeWalt finally did as Eckhart said. He grabbed

Dallas. “Come on, Dallas. You need to be near us….as near as possible.”

“What are you doing, Eckhart?”

“Come on! Don’t ask questions.”

An almighty boom rocked the ship and smashed in the ceiling. Everyone ducked as the hull dented inward. More strikes tore the metal, and light streamed in from outside.

Another cruel explosion pounded the ship on the port side. That must have been the port engine going up.

“Dallas!” Eckhart roared. “Do you want to die here?”

Dallas clomped over to them and reluctantly put his enormous arms around the whole huddle of bodies.

More blasts punched through the torn hull. The assets floated directly over Eckhart’s head. Clifton and DeWalt clamped their eyes shut and buried their faces in Namol’s and Chemorix’s beefy arms.

Another catastrophic explosion hammered the ship’s front end, and then a fountain of laser fire sliced off the tail. The whole rear hatch folded away and dropped into the abyss.

“Now, Dallas!” Eckhart bellowed. “Fire into the Destrine drive!”

Dallas didn’t ask questions or hesitate. He stuck out his arm, locked out his assault gun, and fired straight into the Halfanite.

A bone-crushing shockwave smashed the friends off their feet, and the whole group wheeled off into a catastrophic fireball enveloping the ship. Rippling heat whipped Eckhart’s hair and flashed across his face.

All the friends tightened their grip on each other and held on for dear life. They locked their bodies in an unbreakable knot, with nothing solid to cling to besides each other.

Screams and bellows of fear and pain struck Eckhart’s ears as flames enveloped the *Marathon*, and then a world-shaking boom blasted everything apart.

The heat flayed Eckhart’s flesh from his bones…and then it vanished. He dared to open his eyes to see a shiny blue-white net of Destrine fibers surrounding their group. Flame and licking heat rushed and rotated and swirled all around that net, but it didn’t penetrate the Destrine.

A second later, their ball of protection broke through the fire into open space. Thousands of Ihi surrounded the Stormbreaker, and another mesh of Destrine rotated around the ship, enclosing it in a web of light.

Flashes of orange flame erupted from spots on the Stormbreaker's hull. They popped and flared in the darkness spreading outward across the ship's exterior.

Dallas and DeWalt loosened their grip to watch. The net surrounding the friends sailed farther and farther away from the Stormbreaker. Their ball floated back to the spot where the *Marathon* had left the *Atera*, but Eckhart's fleet wasn't there anymore. Only the Vrali destroyers remained.

The explosions chewing up the Stormbreaker spread, widened, and joined up into a carpet of flame. It swelled and enveloped the whole ship, and then, at some hidden signal, the Stormbreaker detonated in a glorious burst of energy and flying debris.

The Ihi contained everything inside their protective shield. They didn't let anything through, not even the smallest crumb of broken metal.

A second later, the shockwave struck the Destrine net. The woven threads flexed, and the whole flashing inferno imploded on itself. It thumped into a dark cloud of rubble and lifeless space dust.

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10

Eckhart and his friends floated through the hull and came to rest outside the bridge of the *Urlae*, the Vrali destroyer that had carried Eckhart back to his fleet.

Chemorix and Namol lowered Thagmor to the floor. Vrali swarmed around them and picked him up to carry him away. “The Ihi can help him,” Eckhart told him. “Where’s Ingai?”

“I’m here.” Ingai vaporized through the hull and approached Eckhart’s side. “It’s finished. The assets are gone.”

“Eckhart!” someone called from the bridge. “The *Atera* is sending us an emergency transmission. Rixby wants to talk to you.”

He went onto the bridge and pulled up next to Nagok, Thagmor’s chief lieutenant and one of Eckhart’s original Vrali bodyguards. “What’s going on?”

Rixby came on the screen. “I tried to stop them, Eckhart! The aliens won’t listen to me. They don’t recognize our authority. They say they don’t answer to anyone but themselves.”

Eckhart pursed his lips. “Where are the Regiment civilians?”

“They’re still on course for Earth. We’re trying to defend them. Should I attack the aliens?”

“Stay there. Keep defending the civilians. We’re on our way.”

He turned to Nagok and then to Ingai. “Take all the destroyers to rendezvous with the *Atera*. Ingai, get all the Ihi on board now. We’ll need you. Namol—Innyria—Chemorix—we need all your people in line, too. Get over there as quickly as possible.”

The destroyers raced away, with the Ihi rushing on board in a heartbeat. The Vrali destroyers overtook the fleet in no time, and Eckhart saw at a glance that the situation was much more serious than Rixby let on.

A massive alien horde charged Eckhart’s fleet, trying to force its way through. The Banshees had put a healthy distance between themselves and their would-be attackers, but every assault drove Eckhart’s people farther back. The aliens ate away at that safety zone, and the Banshees couldn’t get away.

The fleet took a pounding, and could barely hold its own against so much larger an alien force. More fringe groups must have caught

up with the Banshees. There were a whole lot more attackers now than Eckhart had seen on the Stormbreaker's bridge.

"Get between them!" Eckhart ordered. "Bolster our fleet! Cut the aliens off!"

"Do you want to deploy the Ihi?" Nagok asked.

"Not yet. Hail their flagship."

Nagok did something on his controls. "No answer."

Eckhart snorted. "Open the channel anyway." He squared his shoulders and raised his voice. "This is Adam Eckhart, Aistenz Trotaer's designated successor and leader of the fringe uprising. I order you to break off your attack against my fleet and abandon your quest for revenge against these Regiment vessels. I repeat. I order you to break off your attack or face the consequences."

A scratchy, booming voice answered him. "We do not recognize your authority. We recognize no authority but our own. The fringes recognize no leader."

Eckhart didn't have to give the order. He was back aboard a ship loaded with at least a million Ihi. They could read his thoughts the moment he thought them.

They streaked through the *Urlae*'s hull by their thousands. A seamless wall of Destrine twined between Eckhart's fleet and the attackers.

The aliens charged the combined Ihi defense, but their ships only bounced off. They rushed again and again, but they couldn't break through. They even tried to race around it, but the Ihi only widened it to make sure the upstarts couldn't get any nearer.

The aliens fired on Eckhart's fleet, but their shots deflected off the Destrine and ricocheted back on the ships that fired them.

"Give the order to fire," Nagok growled. "Please."

"Not yet," Eckhart murmured. "They need to carry our message back to the rest of the fringes. We need them to tell everyone that we're in charge."

"That *you're* in charge," Nagok corrected.

Eckhart switched on the communications channel again. "I'm giving you one last warning. Turn around and go back where you came from now, or we'll destroy your force down to the last ship. Do you remember what happened to Ulnus? You will recognize my authority from now on or I will wipe you off the fringes. This is your last chance."

He turned off the channel and waited. Tense silence enveloped

the bridge. The aliens didn't move for a second, but at least they stopped charging. They didn't shoot, either.

The seconds dragged into an eternity, and Eckhart sighed. "Open fire."

"They're leaving!" Nagok told him. "They're turning away."

Eckhart's shoulders slumped. "Good."

He watched them go with mixed emotions. This was his final line in the sand. All his half-measures had stemmed from some hidden uncertainty in his heart that he didn't really have the right to command these aliens because he was an Earthling.

Now all those concerns vanished into so much smoke and dust, just like the Stormbreaker that created them. He was an alien, and he was where he belonged.

"Rixby is hailing you," Nagok told him.

"Hey, sweetie," Eckhart greeted her when she appeared in front of him.

She waved her antennae at him. "Is that you, Eckhart? It isn't someone else?"

He laughed. His body felt strange. He couldn't remember relaxing as much as this in a long time. "It's me, sweetie. You don't have to worry about that. I'm the only one of me left now."

She waddled across the *Atera*'s command podium. "Another attack force is moving in on the Banshees. Should we intercept?"

"Yes. Send the coordinates to the *Urlae*. We'll all go—and send out word to the fringes that this group of Banshees is under my protection. They're going back to Earth."

"Are you sure?" Rixby asked. "Shouldn't we be destroying them ourselves?"

"They're civilians. They're families and old people. They aren't part of this."

The *Urlae* pivoted, and all the Ihi came back on board. The combined fleet started migrating through space and overtook the Banshees. They were already gunning their engines as fast as they could to get away from the bloodthirsty aliens on their tail, but Eckhart's fleet kept up with them easily.

Eckhart leaned over to study Nagok's readouts. "Those ships…" He pointed to the new grouping moving to cut off the Banshees. "They're full of Earthlings."

"What are they doing out here?" Namol growled from Eckhart's other side.

“I guess we’re about to find out.” Eckhart frowned at the readings again. “That’s Colossus *Patriot*. I know that ship.”

“Should we attack?”

“No. Hail the *Patriot*.”

Nagok opened a communications channel to the intruders. This one connected instantly, and Eckhart had to blink stars out of his head when he recognized a bunch of people he knew.

“Good morning, Captain.” A woman with short grey hair grinned when their eyes met. “We meet again.”

“Captain Hennessey! What are you—Sergeant? What are you doing here?”

A different woman stepped forward. Eckhart knew her only too well. “Good morning, Mr. Eckhart. Do you remember me? My name is Marina Pochert. I’m the Chairwoman of the Intergalactic High Court.”

“Yes, ma’am. I remember you. Can I ask what brings you out to the fringes?” Eckhart’s gaze skipped back and forth between Sergeant Sean Banks, Captain Alana Hennessey, Tony Nuñez, former Major Martin Staton, and Jacob Short—all people he knew and respected as some of his closest friends. “What are all of you doing out here?”

“We came out here to talk to you, Mr. Eckhart,” Chairwoman Pochert told him. “We thought we might be able to negotiate with you, and I can see from the way you’re protecting these Banshees that we were right.”

“Negotiate about what? I only saved these people because they’re civilians. I would have wiped them out myself if they were involved in the Regiment’s plans.”

“I know that.” She smiled at him, and it was a big, warm smile like Captain Hennessey’s. He hadn’t seen the chairwoman smile before. She’d never smiled during the hearing at the Intergalactic High Court.

“What do you want to talk to me about, then?”

She took a deep breath. “It’s like this, Eckhart. Do you mind if I call you Eckhart?”

“Everyone else does.”

She actually laughed, and some of the others exchanged knowing smiles. They sure looked happy about talking to him. “It’s like this, Eckhart. Earth no longer has a military presence in space now that the Regiment has been disbanded.”

“Good. Let’s keep it that way.”

“You and I can agree on that, but some people on Earth—quite a few people, actually—they worry that we’re defenseless against the vicious alien hordes.”

Nagok snorted loudly, and Eckhart had to bite back laughter. “I guess I can understand that.”

“We’d like to invite you to come back to Earth with us. The United Collateral Assembly would like to welcome you as an envoy for the alien fringes…I’m sorry we don’t have a better name for it. We would like to open full diplomatic relations with your…your people, starting with a discussion about how much of a threat the fringes pose to Earth.”

Eckhart frowned. “I see.”

“What do you say, Eckhart?” Short asked. “Just come back to Earth and talk to us…if you can stand to set foot on the planet again.”

Eckhart laughed again. The relief of finally making it back to his fleet was starting to catch up with him. Here he was, in the life beyond the Stormbreaker. It wasn’t shaping up to be what he expected.

“What are you doing out here, Jacob? I thought you decided never to travel into space again.”

“I wasn’t going to, but when I found out what this mission was about, I decided to come along. We thought you might be more disposed to meeting with us if you saw a bunch of friendly faces.”

“I guess I am.” Eckhart couldn’t stop beaming at them. He couldn’t be more delighted to see them all, but he still couldn’t get over the fact that they were all Earthlings. They didn’t belong on the fringes at all, not even to meet with him.

“All right,” he told them. “I’ll go with you. I’ll escort these Banshees back to Earth, and then we’ll talk.”

“Thank you, Eckhart,” Chairwoman Pochert replied, and cut the connection.

Eckhart turned around and stopped. Dallas, Bing, Clifton, DeWalt, Ingai, and the three gang leaders all stood behind him. They’d heard every word of that conversation.

They all gazed back at him waiting for him to say something. This was his show. He’d just flexed his authority over the fringe aliens. Now the people of Earth had approached him to negotiate diplomatic relations on behalf of the whole alien population.

He supposed he'd signed up for this, but that didn't really bother him. That was the strangest part. It all made sense in a distant, otherworldly way. He didn't have to hide from his destiny anymore.

He turned to the three gang leaders. "You three go back to your fleets and organize whatever you need to organize. I want you to meet me on the *Atera* in ten hours. You, too, Ingai."

Eckhart waited for them to leave, and then he turned to Nagok. "Reassemble the bodyguard, and as soon as Thagmor is feeling up to it, bring him over to the *Atera*, too."

"Of course," Nagok replied.

Eckhart walked away and signaled Dallas, Bing, Clifton, and DeWalt to come with him. They took one of the Vrali patrol vessels back to the *Atera*. The friends parted ways on the landing platform. The place didn't look the same without the *Marathon* occupying its usual place.

He could just imagine Rixby getting ready to bombard him with questions and information, but he didn't go to the bridge. He stepped into the elevator and rode it all the way to the battlecruiser's very top deck. He emerged on the wide, full-view observation platform. Wraparound windows gave him a full view of the stars on all sides. He was all alone up here…the way it should be.

He went into Aistenz's old apartment. It had been completely remodeled. The central column Aistenz used to buzz around had been removed, along with the platform that had served as his bed.

A regular double bed like the one from Eckhart's quarters downstairs had been installed under a window on the apartment's far side. A full panel of controls connected to the ship's bridge covered one wall.

He had to smile when he saw the changes. Good old Squids. He understood more than he ever let on. He must have known Eckhart would wind up here eventually.

Eckhart crossed the room and sat down on the bed. It was no larger than any other crew bed he'd ever slept in since he'd first bought the *Marathon*.

He stretched out, folded his arm behind his head, and looked up at the stars. He couldn't even bring himself to regret losing the *Marathon*. It was part of his past. It embodied every lie he'd ever believed about himself.

He was home now. He was living on an alien ship in an alien

world. He had absolutely nothing to prove to anyone, especially not himself.

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11

Eckhart entered the conference room behind the *Atera*'s bridge. He saw instantly that this room was no longer big enough to hold all the people he would need to meet with.

The three gang leaders stood together, talking rapidly in the corner. Eckhart's Vrali bodyguard stood across one wall. Thagmor separated from them as soon as Eckhart showed up, but the bodyguard stayed where they were.

Rixby stood on the conference table near the front. Squids stood at her side with Bing, Dallas, Ingai, Clifton, and DeWalt next to them.

Eckhart looked around. "Where's Odais? I asked him to come."

Odais entered behind him. "Here I am."

Eckhart moved into the room, and everyone else surrounded the table. The three gang leaders took longer to break up their huddle. Eckhart eyed them closely. What were they doing over there?

He straightened up and faced his friends. "As you all know, I'm going to Earth to negotiate terms with them. They want me to act as an envoy for the whole alien fringe population."

"It's about time," Innyria chimed in. "You're the best leader we could ask for, Eckhart."

Eckhart held up his hand. "Hold on. Not so fast. Before I leave, we need to settle a few things between ourselves. The fringes aren't united enough to send a single envoy to Earth, or anywhere else. We just saw this with the latest batch that attacked the Banshees."

"But you enforced your authority," Chemorix countered. "The rest will fall in line as soon as word spreads."

"That isn't good enough," Eckhart replied. "No one can negotiate diplomatic terms with Earth without securing the fringes first."

"What do you mean by 'securing' them?" Bing asked. "The fringes have been lawless for centuries."

"That's exactly my point. Earth wants assurances that random alien hordes won't attack and wipe out every Earthling on the planet. I won't be able to negotiate with them unless I know for sure that my authority is strong enough to stop that from

happening."

"You have nothing to worry about, Eckhart," Thagmor replied. "You have the most powerful aliens on the fringes with you. No one will cross you."

"I'm telling you that none of this is enough. We need to unite the fringes into one government. We need to be one political entity before we can stand as equals with any other political entity."

"How do you plan to do that?" Clifton asked.

"It's very simple," Namol interrupted. "The Jackal Clan, the Chosen, and the Immortals have decided to join into one organization."

Eckhart spun around. "What? When did you decide that?"

"Yesterday," Innyria replied. "You told us to go back to our fleets and organize whatever we needed to organize. We anticipated this, and we decided to join forces."

Eckhart stared from one man to the next, but the hits just kept coming.

"All these groups will have to submit to your rule and pledge their loyalty to you." Chemorix waved at Thagmor, Ingai, and Odais. "There will be no more independent gangs. We will have our own structure and our own individual leadership, but in the end, we will all be subordinate to your leadership, Eckhart. The fringes will not be able to function any other way."

"I agree," Thagmor replied. "The Vrali will compete for our own leadership, but that leader will ultimately submit to your authority. The Vrali will remain subordinate to you."

"Which means," Odais added, "that it will be all of our responsibilities to police our own people. Every leader on the fringes will answer to you for the behavior of their own people. If one group steps out of line, it will be our job to punish them in your place."

"The three gangs will remain loyal to you, Eckhart, even now that the war is over," Innyria went on. "It's as you say. We have to be unified. The Regiment kept us divided, and that's exactly what needs to change for us to overcome their oppression."

Eckhart couldn't stop staring from one man to the next. "Are you all sure about this? Are you sure you want to give up your independence?"

"It's a small price to pay for unity," Odais replied. "What we lose in independence, we gain in strength of unity. We'll have more

power together in dealing with Earth and anyone else who tries to challenge us."

"The Outer Rim will fall in line, too," Rixby piped up. "We won't be able to form this unified government without everyone. The Outer Rim will pledge their loyalty to your rule, too, Eckhart."

He spun around with a gasp. "But what about Yausqith?"

"Yausqith will enforce your rule on the Outer Rim. We won't have any more incidents like the one with Ulnus—not from the Outer Rim, at least."

Eckhart opened his mouth to ask her again how she could be so sure of that. Then he stopped himself.

The colonies, outposts, remote planets, and moons of the Outer Rim never acknowledged any structure at all. They were beyond lawless. They were virtually unknown, and so dangerous hardly anyone ever dared to go there.

Rixby had never told anyone what happened between her and Yausqith, or how she convinced him to go back where he came from. The last thing she ever said to Eckhart about Yausqith was that Yausqith hated her and refused even to speak to her.

Something must have changed in a big, big way for her to make this pledge on Yausqith's behalf. Eckhart didn't know what it was, and he probably never would. He could live with it as a mystery as long as Rixby knew.

"If you're all sure, then there's nothing left to do but form our delegation to Earth. We'll need to leave a standing force out here on the fringes to make sure things don't fall apart while we're gone."

"The Vrali and the Ihi will handle that," Thagmor replied. "You'll need a force to accompany you for your own defense."

"The gangs will guard Eckhart," Chemorix replied. "It will be our honor."

"We can expect more attacks on the civilian Banshees," Innyria added.

Eckhart nodded. "In that case, let's divide up our—"

A shrill alarm blasted from the controls under Rixby's feet. They made her jump, and she squeaked in surprise before she hopped over to see what was causing it.

"Another alien attack force is moving in! They're Megaliths! They're going after—"

Eckhart turned away. "Get into position! Bring the Vrali destroyers around to block the aliens' path to the Banshees."

“Wait!” Rixby countered. “The attackers aren’t going after the Banshees. They’re coming after us! They’re moving to intercept the *Atera*.” She looked up and gaped at Eckhart. “They’re coming after you, Eckhart!”

Eckhart charged for the exit. “Bring all the gang fleets in rank with the battlecruisers! Prepare for—”

Innyria stopped him. “No, Eckhart. You stay out of this.”

“What are you talking about? We just agreed that I would enforce my rule.”

“No,” Namol added. “You do nothing. You stand and watch. We will handle this.”

He stared at them for a second, and then, very slowly, they all left the conference room. Eckhart didn’t understand why they didn’t rush off to fight the battle.

They exited on the bridge. Eckhart stepped onto the podium, and Rixby clambered up next to him. Clifton and DeWalt both went to their stations, but none of the others left.

Thagmor, Ingai, the three gang leaders, and all Eckhart’s friends lined up behind him. The Vrali bodyguard filed out of the conference room and took their positions at the very back of the bridge. They all watched in eerie silence as the new threat moved in.

Eckhart’s fingers itched to take the controls, but Innyria’s words wouldn’t let him.

The Vrali destroyers moved in line to block the incoming Megaliths from reaching Eckhart’s fleet. They formed a bulwark of Destrine cannons aimed at the enemy, and then the three gangs assembled in front of the Vrali.

The Jackal Clan took the foremost position, with the Chosen and the Immortals in ranks behind them. The four armies formed increasing layers of protection. No one could get near the *Atera* and its sister ships.

Goosebumps erupted on Eckhart’s arms at the sight. It really was happening. He was too powerful even to raise a finger to defend himself.

These friends of his understood his position better than he did. He no longer had to enforce his own rule, because he had all these loyal followers to do it for him.

“Someone wants to talk to you, Eckhart,” Rixby peeped.

“Who is it?”

“It’s Odhi the Ogre, leader of the Invincibles.”

Eckhart almost told her to put Odhi through, and then changed his mind. He didn’t say anything.

“Aren’t you going to talk to him?” she asked.

“No. Deny the transmission.”

She squeaked in protest, but he didn’t even look at her. His concentration remained riveted on the Megaliths. He wasn’t sure even now that the combined forces out there would be able to defeat this many Megaliths.

It didn’t really matter. If the Invincibles attacked and destroyed his fleet, he’d better find out right now that he wasn’t strong enough to rule the fringes. If it didn’t happen now, he’d only be delaying the inevitable.

“Transmissions are going back and forth between the Vrali and the Megaliths,” Rixby reported. “The Invincibles are communicating with the Vrali.”

Eckhart stopped himself again from asking what they were communicating about. It didn’t matter. The Vrali had pledged their loyalty to Eckhart. He trusted them to handle this on his behalf.

He felt himself rising into the stratospheric heights. He kept getting farther and farther away from everyday life and ordinary people. He didn’t belong to the ground anymore. He had become something else, something apart.

Without warning, the Invincibles charged. They opened fire on the Jackal Clan, and the whole field exploded in battle. The Megaliths rushed the Jackal Clan line, firing some strange, splintered type of plasma that Eckhart didn’t recognize.

The Jackal Clan opened up with their Triorium ejections, and the two forces met in a colossal burst of fire. The Megaliths’ plasma reacted with the Triorium coming their way and detonated in withering blasts that exploded ships on both sides.

None of this stopped either army from attacking with frightening viciousness. The Megaliths plunged through the wreckage of their own burning ships and plowed into the Jackal Clan line.

Megaliths collided with Jackal Clan ships, and more explosions dominoed down the line in both directions. In all Eckhart’s time on the fringes, he had never seen the Jackal Clan fight like this.

They used the same trick on the Megaliths. The Megaliths might be a hell of a lot bigger, but the Jackal Clan had one ace up their

sleeve the Megaliths didn't have.

The Jackal Clan ships activated their Triorium shields and gunned their engines to their maximum. They fired on the Invincibles and dove into the invading army with guns blazing.

They set dozens of Megaliths on fire and then smashed their Triorium shields into the burning hulks. The Jackal Clan bombarded these exploding wrecks back into the Invincibles' ranks, where they crashed into their sister ships and set them alight, too.

The two armies met and merged into each other. Eckhart couldn't tell anymore where one army ended and another began. Time and again, he had to stop himself from either contacting his people or engaging with the enemy himself, but this wasn't his fight anymore.

The fringe aliens wanted him as their leader. Now they had to prove it by stopping anyone else from bothering him. This was their way of showing their loyalty and dedication to the one united government that would rule them all.

The Megaliths infiltrated the Jackal Clan position, but the Jackal Clan held firm. The Megaliths couldn't advance any farther than that, but the Chosen must have felt the enemy was getting too close.

At some invisible signal, the Chosen fleet surged forward and unloaded into the mayhem. Eckhart couldn't see how the Chosen managed to target the Megaliths without hitting the Jackal Clan, but the Chosen sure knew what they were doing.

"Stand fast," Chemorix muttered behind Eckhart.

"Don't worry," Innyria replied. "They won't get past us."

"More communications are going back and forth between the Invincibles and the Jackal Clan leadership," Rixby reported. "Odhi the Ogre is calling on the Jackal Clan and the Immortals to turn and join him."

"Which ship is he on?" Thagmor asked.

Rixby did something on her controls. "I've located the source of the transmission."

"Send it to my men on the *Urlae*."

The whole thing happened in a fraction of a second. Without warning, a large section of the Vrali destroyers vaulted out of position, but they didn't join the battle. They sprang straight up into open space, where they could get a clear line of sight to the Megaliths' assault.

Lightning-fast Destrine blasts erupted from the destroyers and

pounded a single Megalith. It froze mid-battle and then imploded in flames.

The other Megaliths slackened their assault, but the Jackal Clan and the Chosen didn't. They kept whizzing through the confusion, smashing, colliding with, and destroying every Megalith on the field.

"The *Urlae* is transmitting to the Megaliths," Rixby peeped.

"Call them off," Thagmor rumbled. "It's over."

Sure enough, the Megaliths retreated back to their original position. They formed a much more disheveled picture now that almost half their number had been destroyed.

The Jackal Clan and Chosen fleets didn't move. They stood guard over the battlefield, ready to attack the moment any Megalith twitched wrong.

Then, as if by magic, the Megaliths turned slowly and deliberately to face backward toward the fringes.

"It's done," Thagmor announced. "The Megaliths will stand guard here while you go to Earth."

Eckhart stepped down from the podium. His legs felt numb. He didn't understand exactly what had just happened, or how these men communicated so seamlessly with their own fleets.

Then he saw Ingai smiling at him, and Eckhart knew.

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12

The alien fleet glided closer to the Earth solar system, and Clifton sighed. “It looks so tiny all of a sudden.”

“It looks different from the last time we were here, doesn’t it?” DeWalt remarked.

“How can it?” Bing asked. “It’s the same system.”

“I know,” Clifton replied. “Maybe it looks different because I know now how big the rest of the galaxy is.”

“I never thought I’d see it again,” Dallas murmured from Eckhart’s other side. “I’m not sure if I’m happy to be back or not.”

“Take a good, long look, pal,” Eckhart told him. “You won’t be able to stay here—not unless you want the Earthlings to dismantle you to see how you work.”

“I know. It just feels strange coming back here after so long. I don’t feel like I’m human anymore.”

“That’s because you aren’t,” Bing told him.

Eckhart touched Dallas’ arm. He knew exactly what Dallas meant; he didn’t want to come back to Earth, either. He only did it because he had to.

The Banshees carrying the Regiment civilians streaked into the system on a dead course for Earth. Colossus *Patriot* followed at a distance, with the combined Jackal Clan, Immortals, and Chosen fleets coming last.

“Let’s get this over with.” Eckhart steered the *Atera* into the system and turned to leave the podium. “Station your fleets around the outer debris cloud so Earth doesn’t think you’re threatening them.”

“We *are* threatening them,” Chemorix growled. “If they get any ideas…”

Rixby squeaked loudly enough to interrupt their conversation. “A body of ships is launching from the planet!”

Eckhart groaned. “Now what?”

“They’re all Regiment vessels—a mix of Colossus class and Banshee class.”

Eckhart read the situation instantly. The oncoming flock let the civilians make the last sprint into Earth’s orbit, and then the

Regiment ships moved in on Eckhart's party.

The *Patriot* opened communications with the lead Colossus, and Chairwoman Pochert's voice came over the channel. "Unidentified vessels—stand down and return to Earth immediately. This is a diplomatic mission. I repeat. Return to Earth."

No one answered her. Eckhart connected to the *Patriot*. "What's going on? Why is the Regiment coming out at us? They're supposed to be outlawed and disbanded."

"These ships aren't Regiment!" she replied. "The Regiment doesn't exist anymore. Someone must have commandeered these ships. I don't know who, but—"

Four Colossuses opened fire on the *Atera*, and the first blast clipped the *Kestera*. "Triorium shields!" Eckhart ordered. "Immortals and Chosen, get behind us and the Jackal Clan!"

"Don't return fire, Eckhart!" Chairwoman Pochert cried. "Whatever you do, don't fire on them!"

"Why the hell not?" Clifton growled.

Eckhart tried desperately to connect some communications channel to the Colossuses. "Hold your fire or we will defend ourselves! This is your last warning! Hold your fire and retreat to Earth. We're here on a diplomatic mission, but we will retaliate if you continue to provoke us."

The Colossuses spread out, and the Banshees plunged straight into the heart of the alien fleet. "Don't, Eckhart!" Chairwoman Pochert screamed.

"Fire!" Eckhart ordered. "All ships—fire at will!"

The Jackal Clan unleashed a hellish torrent of Triorium. Eckhart's four battlecruisers let loose with all their Destrine. They targeted every Banshee and vaporized them before they got anywhere near the Jackal Clan.

"No!" Chairwoman Pochert shrieked, but Eckhart ignored her completely.

He turned the *Atera*'s Destrine cannons on the Colossuses. "Immortals and Chosen—engage!"

Both fleets whizzed past the *Atera* and overran the former Regiment vessels. The Immortals surrounded the Colossuses, and as soon as the Jackal Clan finished off the Banshees, the Jackal Clan joined the other two gangs in destroying every Colossus in sight.

Eckhart searched the area around Earth. "No other ships are launching."

“I’m scanning the planet,” Rixby told him. “There are no more Colossuses on the ground. This is their whole force.”

Eckhart contacted the rest of his fleet. “Finish them off! Leave none of them alive.”

He gunned the *Atera* and joined in the cleanup. They mowed down the last straggler Banshees, and the gangs attacked the Colossuses in a murderous frenzy.

Eckhart bombarded every ship with Destrine. He skirted one Colossus, slicing a circle around its midline. The Datrium feeds erupted, and he skated the *Atera* away to carve up the next one. The sooner these idiot Earthlings learned who was in charge, the better for everyone.

He actually suffered a pang of regret when the last Colossus boomed to rubble and left the alien fleet in total, undisputed possession of the field. The Earth solar system—the bane and terror of aliens across the fringes—lay defenseless and silent before him.

“That better be the last of them,” Clifton muttered.

“It is,” Rixby replied. “It *was*…except for the *Patriot*.”

The *Patriot* stood alone and forlorn to one side. The Banshees carrying the civilians back from Keilara had already landed on Earth.

The *Patriot* hovered to one side, but it didn’t move. It seemed to have died in that last battle, too. Eckhart hailed the Colossus, and the connection established easily, but Chairwoman Pochert didn’t answer.

Eckhart frowned at Martin Staton and Tony Nuñez. Captain Hennessey stood behind them, giving orders to her bridge staff. “Where’s Chairwoman Pochert?”

Staton gave him a sad smile. “She had to excuse herself. Don’t worry about it, Eckhart. If you follow the *Patriot*, we’ll lead you somewhere you can land.”

“We’ll leave some of our ships out here in orbit…just in case.”

Staton only smiled. “Sure. Whatever you want.”

Staton started to run away when Chairwoman Pochert shouldered him out of the way. Tears streamed down her cheeks and her eyes had swollen up. “I’m…so sorry, Eckhart.”

“Forget it. You aren’t responsible for what a few fanatics did. I don’t hold Earth responsible for this.”

She sniffed and cleared her throat, but she didn’t stop crying. She stared down at her hands and her lips twisted in all the wrong

shapes. “Earth would like to…offer unconditional surrender to the fringe alien fleet. We’re…at your mercy.”

“Stop that,” Eckhart snapped. “We’re here to negotiate as equals. Now stand aside, and let Staton lead us to where we can land.”

She nodded, too overwrought to speak. She stepped aside and disappeared out of Eckhart’s view. Staton reappeared, but he kept it strictly professional. “Follow us, Eckhart.”

Eckhart cut the channel and heaved an almighty sigh. “Man! This is turning into a big old mess.”

“We can look forward to a lot more of this,” Thagmor surmised. “Many on both sides will not want to let the old ways die and start living in peace with their former enemies.”

“They better learn, or it won’t go well for them.” Eckhart followed the *Patriot* through the atmosphere. The bulk of his escort remained in the solar system to guard the area…just in case.

No matter how many times Eckhart scanned the atmosphere, he didn’t see any vessels in orbit. In fact, he didn’t see any space-capable vessels at all. Rixby must be right, but Eckhart still found it hard to believe the people of Earth no longer posed a threat to him and the fringes.

The *Patriot* landed in a massive field outside a city called Helsinki. It didn’t look like a very appealing place—kind of bleak. There were nicer places on the fringes, but he didn’t have time to worry about that.

As soon as he landed the *Atera*, along with his other three battlecruisers, a train pulled up next to the field. It disgorged two hundred armed soldiers, who advanced on the *Atera*.

“What the hell do they think they’re doing?” Clifton muttered.

Eckhart was about to power down the engines, but he cycled them higher instead. He turned the *Atera*’s Destrine cannons on the soldiers and prepared to fire, when the *Patriot* hailed him again.

“This is your bodyguard, Eckhart,” Staton told him. “They’re here to protect you on your way into the city.”

“Eckhart already has a bodyguard,” Thagmor boomed. “You can send these hounds home to their mothers.”

Staton only smiled. “They’re here to guard Chairwoman Pochert and the rest of the diplomatic team, too. They’ll come for us, and you’ll see they’re on our side. You can stay where you are until you’re sure it’s safe. Then we’ll all board the train and ride back into town.”

He switched off, and Eckhart narrowed his eyes at the soldiers advancing on his ship. Then they turned aside to the *Patriot*.

Chairwoman Pochert, Captain Hennessey, and all the other Earthling delegates that came to meet Eckhart exited the Colossus. The soldiers surrounded them in a protective mass, with their weapons aimed outward, before they all made their way over to the *Atera*.

"They must be trying to insult you," Thagmor growled. "Do they think you're a baby that needs constant care and protection?"

"I guess they're just trying to be extra diplomatically respectful." DeWalt stood up. "I'm going down there. What's the worst that can happen? Eckhart's Vrali will be with us, and so will Ingai. They can finish off these guys if they try anything."

DeWalt stepped into the elevator, and the rest of the crew rode down to the landing platform. The soldiers waited for Eckhart's entourage on the grass outside. Chairwoman Pochert smiled at Eckhart when he finally reached her. "Thank you for coming. It's an honor for us to welcome you."

"I hope you don't mind that I brought my own bodyguard." Eckhart nodded at the Vrali and then eyed the soldiers. "We don't mean to insult you, but we don't trust them."

He didn't say so out loud, but these soldiers looked like tried-and-true Regiment stock to him. They wore a different kind of uniform, but he recognized the unmistakable stamp on each of these men.

"I understand completely," Chairwoman Pochert replied. "If you prefer, your people can escort you to the train."

"I don't suppose you want to leave these…" He stopped himself from smearing the soldiers' parentage. "I don't suppose you want to leave these men behind."

"I don't think that's a very good idea, considering what just happened. Someone might attack the train."

Eckhart decided not to tell her that Ingai could defend the train with his hands tied behind his back better than the whole damn Regiment could.

She waved toward the train, and the Earthling delegation moved off with their escort still in position on all sides.

"You should have asked for your own private train," Bing suggested.

"Maybe you should have asked for another city to stay in, too,

so we would all be far away from any Earthlings." Chemorix spotted Clifton and DeWalt listening. "No offense."

"Come on," Eckhart told them. "Let's go see what it's all about."

They crossed to the train. Eckhart spotted Staton, Hennessey, and Short talking to the soldiers long before he got near it.

"What do you think they're talking about?" Innyria asked in Eckhart's ear.

"Probably telling the soldiers not to shoot us," Namol growled.

"Or maybe assuring the soldiers we don't plan to eat them for breakfast," Ingai added, and the others laughed.

"Try not to scare too many Earthlings, Thagmor," Dallas chimed in.

"Do you mean by looking at them? I won't."

Staton, Captain Hennessey, and Short got more agitated in their conversation with the soldiers as the alien delegation got nearer. Eckhart even saw Hennessey and Short casting pained glances in the aliens' direction. He didn't like the look of this.

Finally, the soldiers turned away and climbed into the train. The three Earthlings came toward Eckhart. None of the three hesitated to go near Thagmor and the other Vrali.

Hennessey walked right up to Eckhart and held out her hand to him. "It's all clear for you to get on the train. I told them you'd feel better if they didn't stand guard over you. Things are kind of tense around here. People don't know how to react to a lot of aliens coming to Earth."

"I understand."

She pointed to the last four cars. "Those four are for you and your fellow delegates. Make yourselves comfortable. We'll be in the city soon. The soldiers shouldn't bother you again."

"Thank you."

She beamed at him, and then the three of them took themselves off to the front train cars. Hennessey, Short, and Staton kept smiling at Eckhart and his crew until all three vanished out of sight.

"Is this all strictly necessary?" Thagmor grumbled.

"Unfortunately." Eckhart started toward the last four cars. He relaxed when he found out that Hennessey was right. There were no soldiers outside the cars or posted inside them. All four cars were blessedly Earthling-free until Clifton and DeWalt got onboard.

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13

The last train car had been converted into a sleeper, with fifteen compartments set up as bedrooms. The second last was a lounge car, and the third last was set up as a kitchen.

Namol took one look at the food in the cupboards and bellowed in disgust. “What the holy hell is this filth? Don’t these people eat proper food?”

“This is called fruit.” Dallas picked up a round, red thing and held it up to his helmet. “Mmmm. I sure wish I could taste one of these again.”

“Give it here, man.” Clifton held up his hands. “I’ve been dying for one of those.”

Dallas tossed it to him, and Clifton bit into it. Namol curled his lips into a snarl. “You’re mad!”

“This…” Dallas took a square container of something else out of the cupboard. “This is called lasagna. It’s delicious.”

“Give me a nice platter of skewered Quigoid worms any day of the week.” Innyria collapsed onto a couch and gazed out the window. “I suppose we won’t be eating as long as we’re here.”

Eckhart went over to Dallas and started rifling the cupboards. “Don’t they have any ordinary ration packs?”

DeWalt laughed. “They probably think you’re too special to eat those anymore.”

“Well, what am I supposed to eat?”

Clifton and DeWalt both laughed at him. “Here.” Dallas pulled something out of a drawer. “These should keep you alive.”

He handed Eckhart a fistful of wrapped bars, with pictures of more fruit on the outside. Eckhart glared at them. “I don’t think so.”

“Try it. You might like it.” Dallas ripped open one of the wrappers and held out a dried, compressed rectangle of unrecognizable dots all smashed together. “It tastes like guinea bars. Trust me.”

Eckhart scowled at the things, and then at his friend. Eckhart finally took it from Dallas’ fingers and sniffed it. It smelled like a guinea bar.

He took a bite. It wasn’t too bad. “I guess I can put up with it.”

“What about me?” Chemorix asked. “Do they have any fried Kranik innards over there?” The whole party exploded in laughter.

“You’ll just have to go back to the *Atera* if you want food,” Dallas told him.

Eckhart relaxed with the others. The landscape outside the train windows flitted past, but the countryside didn’t improve.

A few minutes later, Staton, Short, Nuñez, and Banks entered their car. “Are you sure you want to risk your necks associating with the bloodthirsty aliens?” Innyria asked.

Staton laughed. “It beats associating with the diplomats.”

“You guys *are* diplomats now,” DeWalt pointed out.

“And you’re representing the other side,” Dallas added. “You’re fraternizing with the enemy.”

Short and Banks sank onto seats with the others. They didn’t balk at sitting on the same couch with Namol, Chemorix, and Thagmor, not to mention Eckhart’s Vrali bodyguard.

“What have you boys been up to since we saw you last?” Eckhart asked.

Short shrugged. “Just working. Keeping busy, trying to get back to normal life.”

“It isn’t as easy as all that,” Nuñez added. “Not many people want to hire anyone who worked for the Regiment.”

“You can say that again,” Staton added. “That’s another reason we decided to come on this mission. At least our experience on the fringes came to some good.”

“Not much of it,” Nuñez growled.

“I hate to be the one to tell you this,” Short told Eckhart, “but I think the people on this train are the only ones who are really happy you guys are here.”

“A lot of people want to restart the Regiment right away so we have a force to fight the alien invasion that’s going to start any day now,” Nuñez added.

“That would be an extremely stupid thing to do,” Thagmor growled.

“You and I know that. The rest of the Earth population thinks you’re here to conquer us.”

“Maybe we should,” Chemorix countered.

“We aren’t talking like that,” Eckhart interrupted. “We have better things to do.”

“Like what?” Namol asked.

“Like run our own fringes. Like rebuild what the Regiment took from us. We’re here to make sure Earthlings never venture beyond their own system again. If they can manage to keep their sticky little fingers off the fringes, we’ll leave them alone.”

Staton started to say something, but Short cut him off by leaping out of his seat. “Wow! Look!”

He hustled over to the window, and everyone looked out. The train was entering a city of some sort. It didn’t look like any city Eckhart could remember from the fringes, and not because it was full of Earthlings.

It didn’t even look like Helsinki—not the way Eckhart remembered. That wasn’t the most interesting part, though.

A bunch of Earthlings lined the tracks: yelling at the train, waving signs, shaking their fists at the windows. Some even threw things.

They went even more insane when the alien passengers got near enough to the window for the protesters to see them. The Earthlings outside grimaced and snarled in ferocious expressions until they looked truly gruesome.

Something thumped on the car’s roof, and the friends looked up. Another glass panel let daylight through the car’s ceiling.

Several soldiers strode down the train on top of the car. They took up positions kneeling on top of Eckhart’s cars, and the soldiers aimed their weapons down at the protesters on both sides.

“Wow!” Short breathed again. “This is so much worse than we ever expected.”

“Do they really think someone might harm us?” Thagmor asked. “Could these Earthlings really be so foolhardy?”

“I told you, emotions are running high,” Staton replied. “These people think you’re here to enslave us all, or maybe even annihilate us.”

“How could we, with so few?” Chemorix pointed out. “They aren’t thinking rationally at all.”

“That’s what I’m telling you. They’re scared.”

“They don’t look scared,” Dallas replied. “They look angry. They look like they want revenge for us defeating their great Regiment.”

The party fell silent. The train went around a curve, and Eckhart saw more soldiers positioned all the way down the line.

A barricade held the protesters back, and a little farther along, more unarmed soldiers stood guard to block the protesters from

coming onto the tracks. Pretty soon, tall buildings flanked the tracks. No people could fit here, and the protesters vanished into the landscape.

There was nothing left to see, so Eckhart and his friends continued to relax until the train entered a black tunnel. It emerged at an underground platform packed with armed soldiers. They formed a corridor of guns to an indoor stairway leading upward to some kind of lighted concourse.

Eckhart had gotten used to the soldiers by now. He no longer worried that they were here to harass him and his party.

Chairwoman Pochert and Captain Hennessey came over to meet Eckhart when he and his party got out on the platform. “If you come this way, we’ll show you to a place you can stay in town. That way, you won’t have to travel back and forth to your ship each time you want to meet with us.”

Eckhart didn’t argue. He hadn’t realized when he landed the *Atera* in that field that traveling to and from the ship would become such an arduous project.

Chairwoman Pochert climbed the stairs, but fortunately, most of the soldiers stayed down in the tunnel. Eckhart’s Vrali bodyguard surrounded the alien delegates.

Eckhart relaxed slightly when he discovered that the upstairs concourse was totally deserted. Chairwoman Pochert must have cleared it out, because the shops and businesses were all locked up and unmanned.

She guided him to another set of stairs and into an elevator. It was only big enough for him, Bing, Thagmor, Rixby, and Squids. The others had to come up separately.

The glass car cleared the tunnels and kept rising over the city. Eckhart looked down on the streets and Earthlings getting farther away. This trip wasn’t panning out the way he expected.

Chairwoman Pochert stopped the car near the very top of a massive skyscraper—much too high for Eckhart to see any protesters or any other Earthling who might not be happy about his arrival.

She showed him into a luxury apartment even nicer than Aistenz’s old residence. “You can stay here. Your people will be housed all along this corridor, so you can coordinate with them whenever you want.” She motioned across the corridor. “Your majordomo can stay over here…”

Thagmor planted himself by Eckhart's door. "I will stay here until the rest of the bodyguard arrives."

She turned bright red. "Of course. I understand."

She left to show Rixby, Squids, and Bing to their quarters. They all shot Eckhart strange expressions on the way, but in a second, only Thagmor remained. "Are they trying to weaken us by separating us?"

"I doubt it," Eckhart replied. "I think they're trying to be hospitable."

Thagmor snorted. "I don't like these people."

Eckhart turned back to his room. It made him uncomfortable. The bed was about three times too big, and the view over the city unsettled him. He didn't like being this high off the ground without being on a ship where he could see the stars.

Thagmor stayed rooted outside Eckhart's door. Eckhart left it open, and before long, Nagok showed up.

Eckhart heard Nagok and Thagmor talking in their own language. When the rest of the bodyguard arrived, they held a lengthy discussion, no doubt arranging how they were going to guard him in this bizarre world.

He tried looking out the window again, but it only made him queasy. He didn't like staying in this room alone. It didn't feel right, so he headed down the corridor with Thagmor and Nagok.

He found Dallas, Rixby, Bing, Ingai, and the three gang leaders all in one room. "Do they really expect us to stay in separate rooms?" Bing asked. "I'm starting to think Thagmor is right and they're trying to soften us up."

"They aren't," Dallas replied. "It's just their way."

"It's strange," Rixby piped up.

"We should all stay in one room," Namol suggested. "We should drag our beds in here. To hell with their hospitality."

Innyria turned to Eckhart. "What do you say?"

"About what? About staying in one room?"

"Yes. At least then we'd still be a crew."

"We're a crew now," Eckhart replied, "but if you are all staying together, I will, too. I don't like that room. It doesn't feel right."

"That settles it, then." Thagmor turned to Nagok. "Tell the bodyguard to come down here."

Everyone relaxed much more then, and a few hours later, Dallas and Chemorix raided the whole corridor. They hauled mattresses

and bedding back to the one room and dumped everything on the floor.

The friends slouched around, eating various foods that Dallas, Clifton, and DeWalt recommended. Some of it wasn't too bad once Eckhart got over the initial appearance.

Some of their most enthusiastic suggestions backfired spectacularly by turning out to be disgusting. The situation almost descended to bloodshed when Namol tasted something DeWalt called eggplant parmesan.

Namol roared in fury, slapped the tray out of DeWalt's hands, and the tray smashed into the wall. It left an ugly smear down the fresh paint, but that smear didn't look half as bad as the dish tasted. The aliens acted much more circumspect after that about taking culinary suggestions from any Earthling, including Dallas.

Toward evening, Staton and Short came back to check that everything was okay with the guest quarters. Both men grinned like fools when they saw the whole alien delegation bunked down in the same apartment.

Eckhart pulled Staton aside and had a few hard words with him. In the end, they agreed to send Squids back to the *Atera* to bring back enough food for the whole delegation to get through this visit without burning the building to the ground.

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14

Eckhart shifted from one foot to the other and squinted through the door. Then he turned back to Clifton and DeWalt.

Their expressions pained him as much as this moment obviously pained them. “You can’t go in there. You have to go around the other way.”

DeWalt’s face spasmed. “I don’t think…I don’t think I can.”

“You have to.” Eckhart squeezed his neck. “You know you do.”

DeWalt nodded and compressed his lips to hold back emotion.

Clifton’s face drained of all color. He suddenly looked twenty years older. “So…this is it? It’s over?”

“I’m afraid so. This is where we part ways.” Eckhart went over to him and crushed Clifton’s shoulder. “You two have been some of the best crew I’ve ever had, but you’re Earthlings. You have to stay here. You two were never going to leave Earth when this was all over. You know that.”

Clifton lowered his eyes and nodded. “I know.”

“You two really showed your worth. You’re worth ten aliens each. I don’t know what I’m going to do without you.”

“Don’t blow smoke, Eckhart,” Clifton husked. “You’re gonna be just fine without us.”

“You’re gonna be just fine without me, too. You belong here. You don’t belong out there on the fringes.”

“Don’t say that.” DeWalt’s voice cracked with strain.

“I’m really gonna miss you two.”

Clifton’s eyes darted toward the door. “Can’t we…?”

He broke off and looked away again. Eckhart’s heart started to tear in half. He wasn’t sure himself that he could walk away from these two. Walking away from them and leaving them in the past where he would never see them again—none of that even seemed possible.

If he walked through that door, they would come with him. They always did. He never went anywhere without them, even when he wanted to get away from them.

What had he been doing with his life before they came into it? He couldn’t even bring himself to think of them as Earthlings. They

were just there. They were like some piece of flesh growing out of the side of his body.

He went back over to DeWalt and gripped both of his shoulders. "You changed everything I ever thought about Earthlings. I never thought I could care about Earthlings as much as I care about you. I never thought I'd ever have any use for Earthlings."

"You aren't staying, are you?" Clifton asked. "You're leaving after this. You're going back to the fringes."

"I have to. I can't stay here."

"If you're going back, why can't we? What difference does it make if there are three Earthlings out there or one?"

Eckhart shook his head. "You can't."

"We can't because you say so?" Clifton demanded. "Is that why —because you're in charge and you make that decision? Is that why we can't go?"

"No, that isn't the reason at all."

"Why, then? You're in charge of all the fringes. You could decide that we could go."

"No, I couldn't. You can't go back because you're Earthlings and you belong on Earth. You two never belonged on the fringes at all. You know that. This whole thing was one huge mistake. It was always gonna end like this."

Clifton shook his head in protest, but he wouldn't look at Eckhart anymore. DeWalt hung his shoulders in misery. He was rapidly losing the battle for control over his facial expressions.

Eckhart drew in a long, shaky breath. "Look. You can't go back to the fringes. It has nothing to do with me being in charge or how many Earthlings are allowed out there or anything like—"

"Why?" Clifton insisted. "We've been out there for months. No one will care if we go back. We can fly away on the *Atera* and—"

Eckhart chopped his hand through the air. "If you went back, you would get killed, okay? You'd never be able to set foot off the *Atera*. Do you get that?"

"So what?" Clifton asked. "We both love the *Atera*. We both consider it our home. Why can't we stay there with you?"

Eckhart glanced through the door again. Thagmor stood there waiting for him. He had to go.

He turned back to his two friends. This conversation was starting to rob him of his will to live. "You two are going to stay here, and you can't go in there with me. You're Earthlings. You

don't represent the fringes. You're here, and you'll stay here. This was meant to be. It has to be."

DeWalt looked away again and sniffed. Eckhart couldn't wait any longer. He put his arms around DeWalt and crushed the man against him.

Something snapped when DeWalt hugged him back. This couldn't be the end. Every particle of Eckhart's being scrambled for a way to take these two men back to the fringes with him. He didn't think he could survive without them.

Eckhart pushed DeWalt back and held the man at arm's length. Silent tears streamed down DeWalt's cheeks, but he didn't speak.

Eckhart flexed his fingers on DeWalt's shoulders one last time and turned to Clifton. Clifton's cheeks sagged off his bones. Dark bags drooped under his eyes, and his mouth slumped in desolation, but he didn't shrink away.

He hugged Eckhart in a much stronger, crushing hug than DeWalt, and Clifton held on for much longer. "You're gonna be great, Eckhart. You always were."

"Thanks, man." Eckhart's voice cracked, and the words came out more as a whisper.

Clifton pushed against Eckhart's shoulder. "You better go before Thagmor tears one of our arms off."

Eckhart had to laugh. He turned and stepped through the door.

He stepped across some invisible boundary, and the door slammed behind him. Eckhart didn't see anything that might have been holding it open before. It just slammed on its own because he walked through it. He was on this side, and Clifton and DeWalt were on the other side, where they belonged.

That door enclosed him in an anteroom leading to the United Collateral Assembly Hall, the meeting place of the international Earth council. The Assembly once oversaw the Regiment and all Earth's dealings with the fringes—which also all went through the Regiment.

Dallas, Bing, Squids, Rixby, Odais, Chemorix, Innyria, Thagmor, Ingai, and Namol all waited for Eckhart there. As soon as that door closed behind Eckhart, the whole party entered the great hall.

Tiers of seats rose to the great domed ceiling above the Assembly floor. Thousands of people in those seats turned around to stare as the aliens strode into the Assembly Hall.

Eckhart led the way down the center aisle, and a tense silence

fell over the crowd. People who had been mingling and talking in the aisle drew back to give his delegation plenty of space.

The contrast between the aliens and the Earthlings had never struck Eckhart more distinctly than now. The Earthlings gaped at the aliens in blank shock. Most of them must have never seen an alien before, and now they were seeing nine all from different species, plus Dallas.

The Earthlings stared at Eckhart in as much surprise as the others. Their eyes made his skin prickle. He was a different species of alien; they just didn't know it yet. He was a species of one.

An ocean of Earthling faces surrounded him, and they all looked as alien to him as his delegation looked to them. They looked more alien to him than any monster on the fringes. They couldn't belong to the same species as Clifton and DeWalt. That was impossible.

Out of nowhere, Jacob Short burst out of the crowd, charged Eckhart's delegation, and threw his arms around Dallas. Short gave him a huge hug and beamed up at Dallas' helmet.

Dallas laughed and rumpled Short's hair. A second later, Staton came out of the crowd and hugged Innyria, and then Short hugged Rixby.

Those friendly greetings between Earthling and alien thawed the tension, and a few murmurs of conversation went through the Assembly. That started a wave of noise that crested into the same steady throb of talk that had filled the hall a moment before the alien delegation entered.

Eckhart continued through the crowd, and strangers came forward to shake his hand. Many of the Earthlings shook hands with Eckhart's comrades, too.

Once it started, more and more people went through Eckhart's group, shaking hands with all the representatives. Thagmor and Chemorix glared at everyone, but they tolerated the greeting for the sake of formality.

All the faces were starting to blend together when Chairwoman Pochert elbowed through the crowd. She gave Eckhart a huge smile and grabbed his elbow. "Come this way! Come up to the top table."

She steered Eckhart the rest of the way to the front of the hall. A golden parapet separated the lowest seats from a wide section of floor. Two large, curved tables formed a circle in this space, one table curving in one direction and the other facing opposite.

Chairwoman Pochert escorted Eckhart's delegation to the right-

hand table. Her cheeks flushed, and she kept grinning at him and his friends. “Your delegation will sit over here. The Earth delegation will sit over there.”

“Where are they?” Eckhart asked.

“They’ll be here shortly.” She shot a glance over her shoulder and colored again. “I think they’re scrambling to decide exactly how to deal with you.”

“So you aren’t part of the delegation? I thought…”

“I volunteered to go out to the fringes and find you. We all did—Captain Hennessey, Jacob Short, Martin Staton, Sean Banks, Tony Nuñez—we all volunteered. It was like Short said. We thought you should see friendly faces, and…” She snickered. “No one else would go. They were all too scared of you.”

Eckhart found himself softening toward her. “Thank you for coming. It really helped to see friendly faces.”

“The rest of Earth just hasn’t found out that you’re a good man. They don’t know you like we do.”

“Maybe they’ll never learn.” Eckhart glanced past her at a bunch of new people entering the hall behind her back. “I think they made up their minds how to deal with me.”

The color drained from her cheeks when she saw what he was looking at. The Earth delegates filed up to their table and split to go to their seats.

The delegation included eight men and two women. They all looked like they were getting ready to sentence someone to death—themselves, probably. Eckhart didn’t like the looks on their faces at all.

“I better go.” Chairwoman Pochert squeezed his elbow and dashed away into the crowd.

The whole Assembly settled into their seats, and another breathless silence fell over the hall. Eckhart went to his table, and his friends sat down on either side of him.

Dallas took one look at the chairs, and remained standing at Eckhart’s elbow instead. Thagmor also chose to stand on Eckhart’s other side, in an unmistakable guarding posture. Rixby took the seat at Eckhart’s right. She had to stand on the seat so she could see over the table.

The Earth delegates gazed across the floor, and Eckhart instantly recognized that sneer of disgust that they were looking at aliens. They even wrinkled their noses at him. Good. They’d better learn

that he wasn't one of them.

The man in the very center slammed a gavel on the tabletop as though he was passing judgment on the alien criminals in front of him. "This special session of the United Collateral Assembly will come to order. Chairman Arno Jolivette acting as President, Secretary Matteo Rienzo acting as Deputy. This special session is called to establish diplomatic relations with representatives from non-Earth bodies formerly under the jurisdiction of the United Collateral Regiment in accordance with the Intergalactic High Court Ruling dated 201-86-9238 in which…"

Rixby leaned over to Eckhart and almost fell out of her chair. "What are they doing? Are we here to negotiate or not?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe they have to go through these formalities before they start. I don't know."

"Are they ever going to talk to us at all?" Innyria asked from Eckhart's other side.

The whispering from the alien side seemed to unnerve Chairmen Jolivette. He started talking louder, and glared more furiously at the truants at the other table. He punctuated every word like this was the most important information ever communicated.

He kept going on and on until a deafening crash shattered the silence. It echoed through the hall and stopped Chairman Jolivette in mid-sentence.

Everyone present turned to stare at Bing, who sat at the far end of the alien table. A jug of water and a few glasses sat on the tabletop in front of him. He'd been in the act of picking up the jug and accidentally knocked one of the glasses off the front of the table.

It hit the floor with an ear-splitting smash, and broken glass scattered everywhere. The Earthling delegates scowled at him, and the onlookers held their breath to see what would happen.

Bing glanced around and then up at the seats before he shrugged and shot Eckhart a grin. "It wasn't nailed down."

Namol laughed loudly, and Rixby giggled, which earned them even more glares from the other table. These Earthlings were really working hard to make this meeting as hostile as possible, but the incident broke something more than the glass.

A bunch of page boys hustled from the sidelines and got busy sweeping up the glass. Eckhart relaxed back in his seat. He held all the cards here.

These chumps wouldn't be so bent on flexing their displeasure if they had a hope in hell of negotiating terms. They had absolutely no leverage whatsoever, and everyone knew it.

Chairwoman Pochert said it better than anyone. Earth was defenseless. Eckhart was the only thing keeping this backward little planet alive right now.

Chemorix turned to Namol and started talking to him in the Dhesith language of Chemorix's home planet. Odais started talking to Bing, and Bing laughed at something Odais said.

Chairman Jolivette must have gotten the message, because he didn't continue with his speech. He cleared his throat, but none of the aliens paid him any attention. Only Eckhart, Rixby, and Squids seemed to even be looking at the Earthlings at all—except for Dallas and Thagmor, who never took their eyes off the Earth delegates.

Chairman Jolivette opened his mouth and shut it again as he struggled to make his next point—whatever that was.

Eckhart threw pretense aside. "We've come to your planet by special request from Chairwoman Pochert of the Intergalactic High Court. She asks that we give assurances that the fringes don't pose any threat to Earth."

All Eckhart's friends stopped talking. They faced forward and suddenly became intensely interested in what the Earth delegates had to say.

Chairman Jolivette went through another inner turmoil, trying to decide how to answer. "Chairwoman Pochert did not represent this Assembly in making that request."

"I don't give a damn if she represented this Assembly or not," Eckhart countered. "She and the other Earthlings that came to see me showed a hell of a lot more backbone than the cowards who tried to attack us when we entered this system."

Chairman Jolivette pulled his head down between his shoulders. "They didn't represent this Assembly, either. We disbanded the Regiment according to the—"

"Do you think that makes any difference to me at all? People from Earth tried to kill our delegation. This is the thanks we get for coming here to try to negotiate peace between Earth and the fringes. Chairwoman Pochert had to organize armed soldiers to make sure no one else threatened us when we came into your city. Maybe we should rethink whether we can be at peace at all. Is that what you want? Do you want us to respond to those attacks in

kind? Because we can if you want us to."

Chairman Jolivette gulped and exchanged a glance with his secretary. "No. Of course we don't want that."

"Then how about you stop giving me a bunch of static about whether they were representing this Assembly and get down to the business of negotiating peace?"

Chairman Jolivette cleared his throat again. It sounded exceptionally loud in the silence that echoed to the very back wall.

Every ear strained to hear Eckhart's words. Chairwoman Pochert was in that crowd, along with Short, Staton, Clifton, and DeWalt. Sean Banks and the Regiment's surviving experimental assets might be out there, too.

Eckhart couldn't tear his attention away from the Earth delegation. He held Chairman Jolivette's gaze without looking away once. Maybe now this stuffed shirt would wake up and realize that Eckhart wasn't playing around.

"My fleet defended Regiment civilians who were fleeing the fringes. I was the one who ensured they made it back to Earth alive."

"We are aware of that, sir," Chairman Jolivette muttered. "We have the testimony of a certain Captain Alana Hennessey…"

"Then you must realize that the fringe aliens don't want war with Earth. If we did, your planet would be a smoking crater right now."

Chairman Jolivette started to say something, but Secretary Rienzo interrupted. "Excuse me, Mr. Eckhart, but…may I call you Eckhart?"

"I was hoping you would."

"Well, Mr. Eckhart, it's like this. We…well, we need some assurance that the fringe aliens won't change their minds later. We need time to rebuild our military, and then…"

"You can build all the military you want. You can even rebuild the Regiment, if you really want to."

"You can't be serious!" Chairman Jolivette interrupted. "What about…?"

Eckhart held up his hand. He was pleased to see both men shut their mouths instantly. "I said you can rebuild the Regiment if you want. You can build ships and colonies as far as the end of your solar system. The instant any Earth ship ventures outside your system, we'll destroy them with extreme prejudice. I don't care if

it's an unmanned satellite, a scientific research mission, or a civilian colonial transport. You won't venture beyond your own system—ever."

The delegates murmured back and forth to each other.

"What assurance do we have that we'll be safe inside our own system?" Secretary Rienzo asked.

"You have my word."

"How do you know the aliens will honor this?" Innyria murmured in Eckhart's ear.

"That will be for us to enforce. We'll leave the rule in place that any alien can destroy any Earth vessel on sight without any reprisals. You and the gang leaders will relay the order of protection to your people. Rixby will send the same message to the Outer Rim. We'll have a standing death sentence against anyone who even sets off to travel toward Earth with an attack force."

"The question is the Earthlings," Namol growled. "If they're this hostile now, what will they be like once they get their Regiment back?"

"They'll never get it off the ground, and if they try to deploy it against us, we'll crush it in its infancy."

The Earthlings finished discussing amongst themselves. "The United Collateral Assembly offers assurance of safe travel for the fringe delegation to return to your own territory—"

"We don't need your assurance," Eckhart interrupted. "We have a fleet of thousands, and you have one single Colossus. *You* do not provide *us* with assurances."

"You couldn't even ensure our safety to get here," Dallas added. "Do you honestly think you can stop anyone from attacking us? You're toothless."

Chairman Jolivette drew himself up with difficulty. "What terms do you ask in exchange for your pledge not to attack Earth?"

"I don't need any terms," Eckhart replied. "You'll stay within your own system. That's all. You had your time on the fringes, and now it's over. The fringes belong to aliens. No more Earthlings will travel beyond your solar system. That is all."

Chairman Jolivette opened his mouth for the dozenth time, and Eckhart saw the words form on the tip of his tongue. He was about to ask why Eckhart was allowed out there, if no other Earthlings were allowed beyond the edge of the solar system.

Eckhart had heard enough. He turned to Rixby. "Let's get out of

here. I've had enough of this shit."

She turned at the same time to face him. Her antennae wavered in a way that told him she was about to say something when a scream erupted from the hall.

Both delegations spun around in time to see a bunch of masked people leap from the lowest seats. They must have been there all along. Now they all drew out guns and aimed them at the alien table.

Eckhart rocketed to his feet, but he wasn't fast enough. The attackers surged forward, stepping on anyone blocking their path.

Dallas and Thagmor collided with Eckhart from both sides. Dallas raised both arms and slotted out his assault guns. Thagmor grabbed Eckhart in all six arms to yank him out of the line of fire.

The attackers fired over the last few heads separating them from the aliens. Ingai shot forward, and a sheet of Destrine erupted between the alien table and the attackers.

Datrium ripped from the attackers' guns and crackled across the hall. Dallas and Thagmor blocked it from reaching Eckhart, but at the moment before it reached the alien table, Chairwoman Pochert sprinted out of the crowd and ran straight into the path of the Datrium. It struck her square in the chest, and she dropped to the floor right in front of Dallas.

Dallas, Thagmor, and Eckhart all stared down at her, dumbstruck. A pool of blood spread around her destroyed body and saturated the tile floor.

A second later, screams broke out all over the place and the hall descended into full-blown chaos.

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15

At least twenty gunmen poured onto the Assembly floor, spreading out to target as many alien delegates as possible.

Dallas took another step in front of Eckhart and opened fire. He spouted Datrium in all directions, gunning down the attackers in falling swaths.

Armed soldiers rushed from corners and side rooms. They got there a second too late, and the surviving gunmen turned their weapons on the Earth delegation.

More soldiers charged Chairmen Jolivette, but they couldn't stop the slaughter. The gunmen started cutting down anyone and everyone trying to escape, but the panicked crowd blocked every exit.

Namol and Innyria grabbed Eckhart from both sides. "This way!" Namol boomed. "We have to get you out of here."

Eckhart tried to turn back to check on Chairwoman Pochert, but he couldn't even see her anymore.

Dallas planted his legs wide and passed his guns back and forth, blasting every living thing to pieces. Thagmor backed away behind Dallas' back to make sure Bing and the others followed Eckhart. Ingai came last, weaving Destrine behind the retreating crew to block them from the mayhem.

Namol marched Eckhart into a different anteroom. "There's an underground passage out of this building," Rixby squeaked, "but we have to get back to the entrance to find the stairs leading down to it."

"To hell with that," Namol growled. "We aren't going that way."

"We can get through this crowd," Thagmor added. "We just need a few guns."

"Dallas has a few guns," Bing offered.

"Look." Innyria nodded toward the open Assembly floor. "The soldiers are escorting the Earth delegates that way. They must know a safe way out. Let's go that way."

"Yes!" Thagmor agreed. "Let's go."

He and Namol went first and got Dallas' attention. "This way!" Chemorix told Dallas. "We're going this way!"

Dallas rotated, still bombarding the attackers with a steady concussion of shots. The attackers still alive enough to put up a fight hunkered behind chairs, shooting randomly. They hit Dallas a few times, but his armor protected him.

Eckhart's friends kept him close behind Dallas' protection, but before Namol could hustle him across the floor, Ingai raced over to Dallas' side. Ingai fired Destrine strands at the chairs and blasted them to smithereens. He cleared the path for Dallas to finish off the last attackers while the crew raced to safety on the other side.

They overtook Chairman Jolivette, Secretary Rienzo, and two other Earthling delegates. Eckhart didn't know their names.

They were all talking fast to the soldiers who got them out of the firing line. All the delegates jumped when Eckhart's party rolled into the room. "What the…?" Chairman Jolivette began.

"Shut up," Chemorix snapped. "There has to be another way out of this building."

"The entrance is clear now," Ingai pointed out.

"There could be more gunmen hiding anywhere," Namol pointed out. "They were in the Assembly. They must have infiltrated the crowd."

"They were Assemblymen," Secretary Rienzo replied. "They were international representatives in good standing. We never would have suspected them."

"Are you sure?" Rixby asked. "They were masked."

"All the Assemblymen sit in assigned seats. They didn't need to wear masks. Everyone would have seen them sit down in their assigned places before the special session began."

"That doesn't mean anything right now," Eckhart countered. "We still have to get out of this building. If they went this far, they'll have other lines of attack planned."

"What about the library?" one Assemblywoman asked. "It was closed off during the special session."

Secretary Rienzo spun around and gasped. "You're right! It's the perfect solution. No one will be in there." He turned to Chairman Jolivette. "You have your key, don't you, Arno?"

Chairman Jolivette didn't answer. He was staring at the aliens standing so close to him. He just couldn't get his brain to accept that he was really in the same room with them.

"Arno!" Secretary Rienzo snapped.

Chairman Jolivette woke up with a start. "Huh?"

“Do you have your key to the library?”

“Oh. Yes. It’s here.” Chairmen Jolivette pulled some keys from his pocket and held them up as proof.

Secretary Rienzo gave a long-suffering sigh and turned back to the soldiers. “Can you get us through to the library?”

“I will get you through to the library,” Dallas interrupted.

“Oh. Of course,” Secretary Rienzo corrected. “We’ll just have to show you where it is.”

“I know where it is,” Dallas replied. “I have the layout of this complex in my cerebral archive.”

Secretary Rienzo opened his mouth to ask how that was possible. “Not now,” Eckhart cut in. “Go, Dallas. Lead the way.” He turned to the soldiers. “Give your guns to Thagmor.”

“But—”

“Just do it,” Eckhart barked. “Chemorix, you and Namol arm up, too. I don’t think we have enough guns for anyone else.”

The soldiers shrank from the aliens coming toward them. They handed over their guns gladly, and then Thagmor, Chemorix, and Namol completely ignored the Earthlings.

“How far is the library?” Chemorix asked.

“Five hundred yards,” Dallas replied. “We have to cross an open courtyard. If anyone attacks, they’ll do it there. The library is fortified. As soon as we get inside, we can make it back to the train tunnels, and then—”

“We aren’t going back to those quarters,” Thagmor growled. “We’re going back to the *Atera*.”

“We’d better go, then.” Dallas turned to the Assemblymen. “You should stay in the center with our delegation. We can protect you better there.”

Chairman Jolivette went into another one of his stupefied trances. Eckhart grabbed him and towed him into their group. “Come on. You, too, Mr. Secretary. Stand here. Bing doesn’t bite.”

“Unless you want me to,” Bing joked, and Rixby laughed.

“You come up here, sweetie.” Eckhart picked Rixby up. “You can’t move fast enough to get across the courtyard.”

“Thank you, Mr. Eckhart,” Secretary Rienzo croaked.

“Don’t talk,” Eckhart ordered. “Just be ready to move when it comes time to cross that courtyard. Understand?”

Everyone nodded. Innyria and Bing pulled the soldiers into the center, too, and the group set off.

Dallas entered a long corridor behind the Assembly Hall. Eckhart kept checking all around him, but no one came. The silence set his nerves on end. Was anyone out there waiting for him?

He'd rather know for sure that they were than not know at all. He eased up closer to Dallas. "Can you see anyone outside? Is anyone else in the complex?"

"There are people everywhere, and many are armed. I can't tell who's who."

No one spoke again until Dallas reached the end of the corridor. He tilted his helmet from one side to the other. "Anything?" Eckhart asked.

Dallas flung the door open, and Eckhart looked out at a big sun-washed courtyard surrounded by more buildings.

The instant Dallas opened the door, fourteen Colossuses plunged over the complex, bombarding the whole place. What looked like a church directly across from Eckhart's position dissolved in powder and flying stone chips.

Dallas pulled the door shut and the shockwave pounded it from outside, but the bombardment didn't stop. Ear-splitting crashes rocked the floor, and a bone-shaking explosion went off directly to Eckhart's right.

"You said there were no more Regiment ships!" he yelled to Rixby.

"There weren't! They must have had these hidden somewhere."

He leaned in close to Secretary Rienzo. "Get your people to the library, but wait until we draw their fire away from you. Do you understand?"

Secretary Rienzo nodded fast, staring up at Eckhart with huge eyes. A question clouded the secretary's face, but Eckhart didn't have time to explain. "Wait until you see the Colossuses turn away. Then you run. Understand?"

Rienzo nodded again, and Eckhart shoved up next to Dallas. "You ready?"

"Ready."

"Go!" Eckhart pushed him. Dallas ripped the door wide open and rocketed off the ground. His jet thrusters flared, and he soared high over the rooftops, flying straight for the nearest Colossus.

Ingai exploded through the door at the same instant. Destrine threads erupted from his eyes and skin, and poured from his mouth. They surrounded him and levitated him into the sky to catch up

with Dallas. Spikes of Destrine spurted from his field and blasted into the Regiment ships.

“Go!” Eckhart bellowed to his friends.

Thagmor, Chemorix, and Namol bolted into the open. Bing, Squids, Odais, Innyria, and Eckhart dashed into the courtyard.

Eckhart carried Rixby in both arms and took off running back toward the Assembly Hall entrance where he’d left Clifton and DeWalt. He was damn glad now that he sent them away when he did.

Dallas and Ingai occupied the Colossuses, and the Regiment ships turned their fire on the two friends. Dallas took countless Datrium blasts on his armor, but he gave back as good as he got.

He swooped low near one Colossus that hovered directly over the library. Dallas turned his helmet to the ground. He must be watching the Assembly people racing for shelter.

The Colossus started to turn back, and Dallas reacted in a heartbeat. He dove in close to the ship’s hull and pounded its port engines with deafening blasts. The engine blew, and the ship tried to correct.

It couldn’t steer with one engine grouping gone, and it veered hard to port as its starboard engines ignited. The Colossus wobbled away from the library and started going down in the street beyond the complex.

More concussions resounded on another Colossus as Ingai plastered its hull to kingdom come. Eckhart herded his people hard to the right to swerve around the building.

Datrium smashed into buildings and pavement all around the fleeing party. A wall near Eckhart’s head disintegrated in crumbs, and the shockwave pummeled him sideways. He staggered into Chemorix, who caught Eckhart and steadied him. Namol and Thagmor fired on either side, but Eckhart didn’t see who they were firing at.

Eckhart didn’t care. Everyone on this planet was his enemy now. If he’d ever considered giving Earth another chance, this had ended that hope forever.

A Colossus wheeled in front of him and opened fire. Innyria yanked Eckhart sideways for protection behind another building, but the Colossuses smashed that one to pieces, too. They decimated the whole complex trying to wipe out the alien delegates.

Eckhart got lost in the mayhem and staggered into the open. He

checked his position. He was in a street several blocks away from the Assembly Hall.

Another Colossus hovered between him and the hall, but he couldn't worry about that now. His party took off running in that direction as the giant ship opened fire again.

Eckhart covered his head with one arm and clutched Rixby tight against him for shelter in the hurricane of debris. A Datrium blast punched into the park right in front of him as more ships thundered out of nowhere to hunt the party down.

The din overhead reached skull-shattering proportions as Dallas and Ingai collided with the enemy. The two worked together, with Ingai tying up the Colossuses in Destrine while Dallas blew them apart.

Another Colossus detonated directly over Eckhart's head, and the impact almost knocked him over. Only the tight cluster of friends surrounding him held him upright.

The street in front of the Assembly Hall opened into a large park beyond. The party darted across the street just as four more Colossuses unloaded on the Assembly Hall. They combined their firepower to decimate the building to smithereens.

Rixby shrieked in fright, and Eckhart put on speed trying to reach a clump of trees ahead, but it wasn't big enough. It wouldn't protect him from anything, especially not a full-sized Regiment Colossus.

Innyria yelled something to him, but Eckhart was running too fast to stop now. He bolted into the trees and almost collapsed on his knees when another ship banked hard out of the city beyond. It rocketed toward the Colossus, and Triorium enveloped the attacker. The *Atera* took a position right above the friends to drive the Colossus off.

"Keep moving!" Eckhart yelled. "Don't stop! Get on board! Hurry!"

The *Atera* kept hammering the Colossus with shots, but the enemy ship didn't leave. The *Atera* turned backward to open its hatch, and the Colossus plunged in for another attack.

Datrium nailed the *Atera*'s stern. Eckhart's party couldn't get close enough under such a vicious assault, but at that moment, the *Kestera* screamed out of nowhere and laid into the Colossus with a vengeance.

"Now!" Eckhart roared.

He shoved his friends before him, and the whole group charged for the open hatch. The other two battlecruisers rocketed across the city, drawing the rest of the Colossuses clear of the *Atera*.

Innyria and Bing sprang onto the ramp. Chemorix, Thagmor, and Namol stood guard while Squids and Odais vanished inside.

The three guards turned to flank Eckhart. He started to put Rixby down when a yell reached his ear from across the street. “Eckhart! Eckhart!”

He glanced back to see Clifton and DeWalt on the sidewalk in front of the Assembly Hall. They were moving toward him and the *Atera*.

He paused, and his eyes met theirs. It would be so easy to wait just a little longer, just long enough for them to catch up and get on board the *Atera*. He could take them back to the fringes with him. He could keep them with him for life.

No, he couldn’t. An impassable barrier separated him from them —the barrier of a few dozen genes. They would never know, but he would always know.

He stepped onto the ramp and ran inside. The ramp shut behind him and the *Atera* shot upward flying fast and straight for the high atmosphere.

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16

Eckhart stepped onto the command podium and took the *Atera*'s helm. He signaled Dallas. "Get on board, Dallas! Leave them alone!"

"Not yet, Eckhart!" Dallas called back. "It's almost finished."

"Get aboard *now*, Dallas!" Eckhart ordered.

Dallas paused in his headlong flight around the remaining Colossuses. Ten of them still battled the *Eotera*, *Sitera*, and *Kestera*, along with Dallas and Ingai.

Dallas finally retreated to the *Atera*'s hatch, and Eckhart's controls showed him on the landing platform. He didn't look happy.

"Full assault!" Eckhart ordered. "Deploy our Velocities and wipe the Colossuses off the map."

Rixby climbed onto the podium next to him and started calling into the communications system. "Squadron One and Five—launch and engage—full assault! Target their Datrium cores!"

"Full Triorium spread!" Eckhart told the other battlecruisers. "Ingai—combine your Destrine with our Triorium!"

The *Kestera* wheeled to bombard a Colossus moving in on the *Atera*. Both battlecruisers opened fire, and Ingai streaked out of nowhere. He threaded his Destrine into their combined Triorium ejections, and the Colossus exploded in Ingai's wake.

Eckhart turned his attention on three more Colossuses ganging up on the *Eotera*. Ingai's voice came out of the air right near Eckhart's ear. "Destrine drive, Eckhart! Now!"

Ingai spat Destrine at all three Colossuses and held them suspended so they couldn't get away. The battlecruisers struck in unison, and their Destrine cannons shot through Ingai's web.

The three ships blew at the same time, and Ingai's net captured all the debris and combusting Datrium in a safe ball.

He released them, but the battle was already swinging the aliens' way. The five surviving Colossuses tried to turn tail.

"Hunt them down!" Eckhart ordered. "Don't leave any ships alive except the *Patriot*."

The *Patriot* still sat in the field where Captain Hennessey had left it. It was totally undamaged, but Eckhart didn't care. He would never destroy that ship. Earth wouldn't be able to do anything with

one Colossus.

He didn't give two shits about the others, though. The battlecruisers raced up behind the fugitives, and the fleeing Colossuses spun around to defend themselves.

Datrium smashed into the *Atera*'s Triorium shields, and the ship shuddered under the bombardment. Eckhart savored the moment. These pests couldn't touch him.

A second later, the Velocities hurtled past the *Atera* and enveloped the Colossuses. The Regiment ships tried to shoot the fighters as well as the battlecruisers and wound up hitting neither.

"Eckhart!" Rixby squeaked. "Captain Hennessey is hailing you."

"Not now."

"She says she knows a way to detonate the Colossuses remotely. She says the Regiment built remote destruct mechanisms on each ship. She says—"

"I said not now. This is our fight, not hers."

Eckhart stabbed his finger to fire the Destrine cannons. Destrine erupted from all four battlecruisers. Then Ingai joined in, and the alien force finished the Colossuses off until none remained.

"Let's go, Ingai," Eckhart called. "Come on back aboard."

"On my way."

Eckhart turned the *Atera* toward the stars, and Ingai floated through the hull to join him on the bridge. Dallas arrived a second later. "Why didn't you let me finish them off? I was enjoying myself out there."

"I didn't want to leave you behind, pal."

"You wouldn't have."

Eckhart didn't answer. None of this mattered anymore. He was going home.

He gunned the engines and soared away as far as Mars before he looked back. The gang fleets came to meet him, and Eckhart scanned Earth from a distance.

Nothing moved down there. No more ships came out to attack him. Now maybe the people of Earth would take his threat seriously and keep to themselves. He wouldn't hesitate to rid the galaxy of any Earthlings that ventured into the fringes.

He started to turn the ship around when Rixby squeaked. "Secretary Rienzo is requesting communications, Eckhart. He's in the former Regiment Command Center. It's the only installation on the planet with transmission capability strong enough to reach us."

Eckhart opened the transmission. “You made it, Mr. Secretary! Is everyone alive?”

“Thanks to you, Eckhart. I don’t know how we can repay you. We never expected you to be so generous—”

“You don’t have to repay me. Just leave the fringes alone. If your people ever decide to colonize space again, stick to your own system. The fringes are a big place. You keep to your own corner, and leave us to ours.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to—?”

“I’m sure,” Eckhart cut in.

Secretary Rienzo nodded fast and compressed his lips. “Thank you.”

“You said that already. Spread the word about what I said. You’re responsible for policing your own population and making sure they follow the terms of our peace agreement. If anyone violates it, you can expect us to retaliate.”

“Of course. I’ll see to it.”

Eckhart glanced past Secretary Rienzo’s shoulder. Chairman Jolivette sat behind Rienzo, not even looking toward the screen. The guy seemed to have gone catatonic since he left the Assembly Hall. His energy had only lasted long enough for him to make that introductory speech, and now he was finished.

“Goodbye, Mr. Secretary,” Eckhart told him. “I hope we never meet again.”

Rienzo burst into a grin, and his cheek twitched. “Me, too. Goodbye, Eckhart.”

Eckhart switched off the connection, and the gangs fell in behind the *Atera* on the long route back to the fringes.

Eckhart stepped off the podium. He headed for the elevator to ride down to the landing platform, but as soon as he got into the car, Squids darted in with him.

The doors closed. This elevator was becoming Eckhart’s private office, where Squids delivered the most sensitive information he couldn’t get anywhere else.

“Well?” Eckhart asked. “What do you have to say to me?”

“I just received word from General Borzi on Tictus. He’s assembled the ground troops for your arrival, and he’s also converted one of Aistenz’s old training halls into an Assembly building. You can use it to meet with delegates from all over the fringes.”

Eckhart burst into a huge grin and crushed Squids' shoulder. "What would I do without you, Squids? Thank you."

"Several more delegations are on their way there now. They want to pledge their support to your campaign."

"Excellent."

"There's another fleet of battlecruisers that Aistenz kept in reserve in case he ever needed it," Squids went on. "It's stored at Naxobus."

"How many ships are in the fleet?"

"Five thousand."

Eckhart's jaw dropped. "Why didn't you tell me this before? We could have used five thousand ships in the rebellion."

"You were already managing with the ones you had, and when you weren't, five thousand more wouldn't have helped you. They would only have gotten destroyed."

Eckhart laughed. Relief and happiness flooded him. Nothing stood between him and the fringes. He was going back to the life where he really belonged. He'd gotten rid of the Regiment. He didn't have to worry about them anymore.

He was building an overwhelming fleet no one on the fringes would dare to stand against. He would bring peace to the fringes. The alien population would rebuild prosperity with the resources the Regiment had spent centuries stealing for themselves.

His mind wandered back to Earth. What the Earthlings did with his warning was yet to be seen. At least he'd be ready to counter anything they threw at him, if they ever took it into their heads to test him.

He stepped out onto the landing platform to find the three gang leaders, Thagmor, and Ingai standing together again. Eckhart slowed his pace when he approached them. "What are you men up to now?"

"Nothing, Eckhart," Namol replied. "We were just talking."

"When you get together and start talking, that usually means you're getting ready to spring something on me."

"We would never do that," Innyria told him, and immediately grinned guiltily when Eckhart confronted him.

"Not anything you need to worry about, at least," Thagmor added.

"Now I'm really worried. What is it?"

"I've told them you're going to Tictus," Ingai told him.

“Of course he is,” Chemorix boomed. “It’s Aistenz Trotaer’s old headquarters. It’s the perfect place for Eckhart to set up his new government headquarters.”

“But you won’t be going there,” Eckhart replied. “You’ll all be going back to your people. Each of you will be in charge of your old gang. Isn’t that what we agreed on?”

“You’re wrong,” Namol told him. “We agreed that each of our old gangs would have its own separate leadership.”

“And that’s you,” Eckhart replied. “You’re the leaders of your own gangs.”

“We *were* the leaders of our own gangs,” Innyria corrected. “We won’t be once we reach Tictus.”

“Why not? Don’t tell me you’re all stepping aside to let someone else take over. How am I supposed to work with people I don’t even know, let alone trust as much as I trust you?”

“That’s why we’re staying,” Innyria replied. “You need people you trust. The three of us will stay on Tictus as envoys between you and our gangs. We’ll communicate your wishes to our people, and our people will go through us if they need to communicate with you. It’s the logical path.”

“So you’re staying?”

“If you’ll have us,” Namol replied. “Unless you’d prefer someone else.”

“No.” Eckhart gulped down a lump in his throat. Now that he’d finally finished this war, he’d been preparing himself to say goodbye to the men who’d been with him through it all.

He turned to Thagmor. “You’ll be going home, though, won’t you? You’ll need to face a challenge for leadership when you get there.”

“I’m staying as envoy, too,” Thagmor replied. “And your bodyguard is staying on. You’ll need them.”

“As am I,” Ingai added.

Eckhart looked back and forth between the two of them. They’d been fighting side by side ever since they’d left Gruna. “What’s going to happen to the Vrali and the Ihi? If the Vrali destroyers go back to Gruna, that means the Ihi…”

“The Ihi are returning to Gruna as well,” Ingai replied. “We’ve come to an agreement with the Vrali. We’ll continue to supply them with Destrine, as long as we can do it willingly. We won’t return to our animation tanks. We won’t need to.”

"Then…"

"I'll stay behind with you and these men." Ingai smiled up at Eckhart. "We can accomplish more here."

"So you'll live in peace together on Gruna?" Eckhart hardly dared to believe this. It seemed too good to be true.

"That is the plan," Thagmor replied. "I'm afraid the destroyers won't be able to stay on Tictus, but the *Urlae* will stay, and the others will be ready for you if you ever need them."

"As will the Ihi," Ingai added.

"Thank you." Those words sounded so terribly inadequate right now. Eckhart couldn't have anticipated just a few minutes ago how much stability and certainty these men gave him.

He'd still have this core around him, even in the new world waiting for him. Whatever else happened, he would always have this.

A moment later, Dallas and Bing showed up with Odais. "Rixby has contacted my people for me," Odais told Eckhart. "I've informed them that I'm staying with you on Tictus."

Eckhart beamed at him. "Thank you. I can't tell you how much I appreciate this."

Odais shrugged. "It's the least we can do."

Dallas cocked his head to one side. "Rixby is sending you a message through my helmet, Eckhart. We're coming up on the Vrali position."

"Are you going over to the *Urlae* to say goodbye to your people?" Eckhart asked Ingai.

Ingai smiled at him. "I don't need to."

"I'd better get back up to the bridge, then."

Eckhart, Dallas, Bing, and Squids returned to the elevator, and when Eckhart reached the podium, he witnessed an incredible sight unlike anything he could have imagined.

The Ihi from the *Urlae* floated through the destroyer's hull, but they didn't sweep straight over to the other destroyers and fly away. They surrounded the *Urlae*, and a moment later, all the rest of the Ihi emerged from their own ships. They twirled and rotated around the destroyers, and then they all swooped over to the *Atera*.

They rotated around the battlecruiser in a swirling cloud of blue. Eckhart couldn't see individual Ihi inside each gleaming speck of stardust.

Eckhart's throat constricted as they formed a continuous web of

light and pulsing energy around the *Atera*. Ingai didn't need to say goodbye to his people. He would remain connected to them for all time through their mysterious link.

The Ihi had to say goodbye to Eckhart. They were going home to a brand-new planet and a brand-new world of peace and harmony with the Vrali. Eckhart would give anything to see the new society these two powerful peoples built together.

Gruna would become unrecognizable, but he would probably never see it. He'd be too busy ruling the galaxy and telling everyone else what to do.

He didn't mind losing Clifton and DeWalt. They belonged on Earth, and nothing would ever bridge the gap between them and the fringes. Saying goodbye to the Ihi hit him in a different place. These were the only other people he had to say goodbye to, and he hated to see them go. He was really starting to enjoy having them around. They'd turned out to be a thousand times tougher than he'd first realized on Gruna.

They weren't leaving him. They would always be there, inside his thoughts. What Ingai knew, they all knew.

A chill fell over his heart when that blue glow shrank away and became again millions of tiny dots in the blackness of space. Space felt cold and empty without them.

He didn't begrudge them their victory, but he couldn't help feeling a pang of regret when they reentered the destroyers and the Vrali fleet sailed away. That one goodbye encompassed all the others, and now it was over.

He came back to his senses to find Rixby, Squids, Dallas, and Bing by his side. Rixby did something on the controls and brought up the route to Tictus. The alien delegations that wanted to see him were already entering orbit. They were waiting for him.

He found himself studying the planet. Aistenz had built hangars, bunkers, warehouses, barracks for his ground troops, and a thousand other things to house and strengthen his vast army.

Now Eckhart was going there to take it over and make it his own. He would put his own stamp on it and make it something completely different from what Aistenz had made it.

Maybe somewhere down there, Eckhart would find quarters for himself. In time, Tictus would become familiar and worn with routine. It would become a storehouse of memories, successes and failures, and battles won and lost.

In time, it would become as unrecognizable from Aistenz's world as Gruna was about to become. Eckhart would build a new society here, a society where people could trade and work together without constantly fighting and tearing each other apart.

Maybe, one of these days, Eckhart would find the home he sought for so many years, the home he'd left Parilia to find. He'd thought for years that he found it on the *Marathon*. Then he thought he'd found it on the *Atera*, but both of those had been wrong.

He'd never had a home before, because he'd never belonged anywhere. Now he would, and now, for the first time in his life, he could put his roots down and finally start growing.

The End

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AFTERWORD

I hope you enjoyed the *Marathon* series. If you found it worthwhile, please consider leaving a review wherever you got the box set. Reviews are the lifeblood of an independent author like myself, and they make a real different to others who are considering a purchase. Thanks for reading!

— *Daniel Young*

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